The New Criterion

June 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *June 1997*

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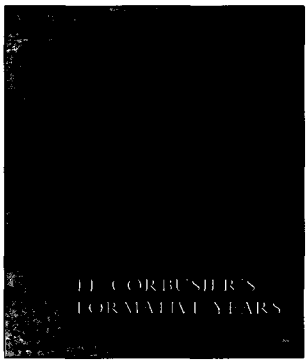

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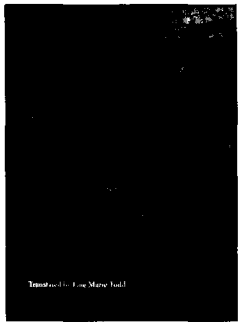

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Notes & Comments: June 1997

Attitudes toward literary excellence

It may be true, after all, that history—the history of literary attitudes, anyway—does repeat itself as farce, if only in the form of that perennial farce called literary politics.

More than fifty years ago, in an essay called "Attitudes Toward Henry James," the late Philip Rahv paused in the midst of the James revival then in progress to assess some of the more benighted critical opinion that continued to haunt the reputation of this great writer. "The strategy is simple," Rahv wrote: "James was nothing but a self-deluded expatriate snob, a concocter of elegant if intricate trifles, a fugitive from 'reality,' etc., etc." One of the writers cited by Rahv was the still influential V. L. Parrington, who, in the final volume of his *Main Currents in American Thought*, had dismissed James as "a lifelong pilgrim to other shrines than those of his native land, who dedicated his gifts to ends that his fellow Americans were indifferent to." Rahv correctly characterized this attitude as deriving from what he called "the Populist spirit of the [American] West and its open-air poetics." Absurd as Parrington's dismissal sounds to us today, it was once the accepted attitude toward James's achievement in the world of mainstream literary and academic opinion.

We have been reminded of this all but forgotten episode in the history of literary attitudes by two recent developments. One is the publication of a new collection of essays by Pico Iyer called *Tropical Classical* (Knopf); the other, the recent announcement in *The New York Times Magazine* by James Atlas, the biographer of Delmore Schwartz and Saul Bellow, that he had given up reading Henry James and other classics of fiction for less taxing intellectual endeavors. We do not mean to equate these two events. Mr. Iyer's book has much to recommend it, and in the essay from which it draws its title—"Welcome to the Age of Tropical Classical"—it addresses a literary phenomenon of some importance. Mr. Atlas's farewell to serious literature was more in the nature of a yuppie-generation career move, as it was accompanied by an announcement that Mr. Atlas himself would henceforth be mainly occupied with the editing and marketing of a new line of short biographies devoted to subjects suitable for movie and television treatment.

Yet, different as these developments may have been in their implications for the future of literature, it was interesting to see the extent to which Henry James—and the literary tradition he is taken to represent—was invoked by both of these writers as a butt in the pursuit of their respective professional agendas.

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It is the view of Mr. Iyer, a British-born Indian writer who now lives in California and Japan, that a new literary voice is, as he writes, "beginning to remake the contours of the global village." It is this voice he calls "Tropical Classical." Its three living masters are "Derek Walcott, in poetry, Michael Ondaatje, in fiction, and Richard Rodriguez, in the essay form." What distinguishes these writers, in his view, is their "ability to season high classical forms with a lyrical beauty drawn from the streets and beaches of their homes." It is this ability that is said to enable these writers to "put sparkling new wine into cobwebbed old bottles, and shake the whole thing up to make it fizz."

Despite the infelicity of the metaphor, Mr. Iyer has clearly taken hold of an important subject. It is his political treatment of it, however, that suggests that we may now be entering upon a new era of literary demagoguery, replete with an updated version of "open-air poetics," akin to that of the Parrington period. For first on Mr. Iyer's list of writers to be downgraded in the interests of the Tropical Classical initiative is Henry James. "Imagine Henry James on the back streets of Tijuana," he writes, as if nothing more need be said on the subject.

In "Welcome to the Age of Tropical Classical," this passing swipe at James quickly proves to be merely a foil for a far graver indictment of V. S. Naipaul. It isn't enough for Mr. Iyer to extol the literary virtues of Derek Walcott. In the interest of advancing the Tropical Classical cause, Mr. Naipaul—described as Mr. Walcott's "fellow writer of the Caribbean, the dean of the old post-imperial debate"—must be maligned:

> Begin with surfaces: Naipaul, stiffly immured inside his Wiltshire cottage, while Walcott shuttles back and forth between the islands and Massachusetts. Naipaul slamming the door on Trinidad, and keeping it locked up inside some dusty corner of himself, like the first Mrs. Rochester; while Walcott throws open the windows to West Indian light and lets it fall upon the pages of his Homer. Naipaul schooling himself in the way of his teachers, so that his prose is as chaste and formal—as rigorously English—as that of any Englishman; refining the West Indies (and the East) out of himself to write sentences that sound as if they have never seen tropical birds or island skies or hurricanes. A prose of discipline and clarity and order that always keeps its back straight and its shirt buttoned to the top; a prose that takes donnish pains not to dance.

While acknowledging that "to be sure, some of our current liberation is largely the result of what the likes of Naipaul have achieved, now that students can devour copies of *Guerrillas* in Twentieth-Century English Literature classes," Mr. Iyer nonetheless condemns V. S. Naipaul for what is said to be his tendency "to affiliate himself with the most traditional, conservative aspects of the Old World order."

Pico Iyer is a better prose writer than V. L. Parrington ever was, but the gravamen of his charge against V. S. Naipaul is very much akin to Parrington's attack on Henry James. It is politics masquerading as literary aesthetics—the kind of politics that, as many people in the international literary world have long been aware, have already cost Mr. Naipaul the Nobel Prize he should have been awarded years ago.

Compared to such frontline skirmishes on the international literary scene, James Atlas's farewell to serious literature is little more than a comic footnote to the cultural life of his yuppie generation—a generation that, to judge by Mr. Atlas's own recent accounts in *The New Yorker*, seems to be settling into the cheerless complacency of a philistinism to rival any we've seen in the past. With his dismissal of the great modern writers—not only Henry James but Faulkner as well—as "cult classics" and "the property of an elite," Mr. Atlas reminds us of no one as much as the late Van Wyck Brooks. This truly is literary history repeating itself as farce.

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Outing the truth at the "Times"

The difficult thing about Orwellian mendacity is keeping one's verbal guard up. It is a simple enough matter to declare that "War is Peace" as did the masters of Newspeak in *1984*. But even if one exercises ceaseless vigilance, reality has a way of breaking in and demonstrating rudely that war, after all, really is not the same thing as peace. This is the case with "affirmative action," which we have always regarded as one of the great Orwellian coinages of our time. What the phrase really means, of course, is "preferential treatment": i.e., institutionally enforced discrimination on the basis of race, sex, ethnicity, or some other victim trait-of-the-month quality. And while, with practice, liberals find it easy to *say* that "affirmative action" promotes fairness and discourages discrimination, the results are so obviously unfair and discriminatory that even the most committed liberal ideologue is bound to slip up now and then.

So it was recently with *The New York Times*, one of our most reliable purveyors of politically correct piety on this and other issues. On April 24, the Association of American Universities ran a large advertisement in the *Times* reaffirming its "commitment to diversity as a value that is central to the very concept of education." Endorsed by the Association's sixty-two member institutions—including Yale, Harvard, Brown, Princeton, and Brandeis—the advertisement was prompted by the growing public uneasiness about the discriminatory policies enshrined in "affirmative action."

In content, this statement by the Association of American Universities was little more than a public declaration of virtue. "We, the undersigned, endorse liberal Newspeak": that, in a nutshell, was what the advertisement meant. Its authors spoke of reaffirming "the broad principles of equal opportunity and equal protection"; they then went on in the same sentence to list the "many factors . . . including ethnicity, race, and gender" that they would adduce as reasons for denying "equal opportunity and equal protection" in admissions.

Of course, such contradictions are simply business as usual in the academic world these days. What did catch our eye, though, was the news story that the *Times* ran in a column right next to the advertisement: or, rather, it was the headline of the story that really made an impression: "62 Top Colleges Endorse Bias in Admissions." Yes, we thought, that about sums it up. But since when did *The New York Times* admit that "affirmative action" and a commitment to "diversity" constituted bias? That headline writer was quite right: "affirmative action" *is* bias, and "diversity" is the shibboleth under which it is routinely pursued. Until now, however, that dirty little secret had been kept tightly under wraps by the liberal establishment. What happened?

What happened was that, in a careless moment, the truth leaked out. But not for long. The very next day an Editor's Note informed readers of the *Times* that running the headline was the result of an "editing error." As *The New York Post* reported, the *Times*'s editors couldn't quite bring themselves to come right out and say that the headline was wrong or inaccurate. Instead, they insisted that "'Bias,' as a term for affirmative action, was neither impartial nor accurate" and that "it should not have appeared." But of course "bias" is an exquisitely accurate and impartial term for "affirmative action," capturing in two short syllables exactly what it is, though not what it would like to seem to be. The question is whether, when it comes to issues of great public moment, one prefers to call things by their real names or whether we will be satisfied with euphemism, equivocation, and deceit—with Newspeak, in short. We have long suspected that our Paper of Record had a weakness for Newspeak. It was, in a grim sort of way, gratifying for once to have it illustrated so graphically.

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The future of the European past: X

Experiments against reality

by Roger Kimball

I do not have much use for notions like "objective value" and "objective truth."
—Richard Rorty

The man who cannot believe his senses, and the man who cannot believe anything else, are both insane, but their insanity is proved not by any error in their argument, but by the manifest mistake of their whole lives.
—G. K. Chesterton

In the foreword to his magnum opus, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), the great German scholar Ernst Robert Curtius noted that his book, for all its daunting scholarship, was "not the product of purely scholarly interests." Rather, it

> grew out of a concern for the preservation of Western culture. It seeks to serve an understanding of the Western cultural tradition in so far as it is manifested in literature. It attempts to illuminate the unity of that tradition . . . by the application of new methods. . . . In the intellectual chaos of the present it has become necessary . . . to demonstrate that unity. But the demonstration can only be made from a universal standpoint. Such a standpoint is afforded by Latinity.

It would not be easy to find a passage more at odds, in tone or substance, with the sensibilities that dominate the cultural landscape today. Curtius's talk of "new methods" might at first elicit some enthusiasm from trendy advocates of literary theory: after all, the word "method" can be counted on to affect them the way a ringing bell affected Pavlov's dog. In fact, though, they would find Curtius's patient investigation of literary *topoi*—for that was what he meant by "new methods"—hopelessly *retardataire*. And Curtius's method is the least of what sets him apart from the reigning sensibilities. Much more important is his quiet but determined concern for the "preservation of Western culture," his effort to exhibit the "unity of that tradition," his faith in a "universal standpoint" from which the "intellectual chaos" of his time could be effectively addressed, even his turn to Latin, "the language of the educated during the thirteen centuries which lie between Virgil and Dante": all mark him as an oddity in the present intellectual climate.

Today, the very idea that there might be something distinctive about the Western cultural tradition—something, moreover, eminently worth preserving—is under attack on several fronts. Multiculturalists in the academy and other cultural institutions—museums, foundations, the entertainment industry—busy themselves denouncing the West as racist, sexist, imperialistic, and ethnocentric. The cultural unity that Curtius celebrates is challenged by intellectual segregationists eager to champion relativism and to attack what they see as the "hegemony" of Eurocentrism in art, literature, philosophy, politics, and even in science. The

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ideal of a "universal standpoint" from which the achievements of the West may be understood and disseminated is derided by partisans of cultural studies and neo-pragmatism as parochial and, worse, dangerously "foundationalist."

Writing in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Curtius naturally had the assaults of totalitarianism chiefly in mind when he spoke of the "intellectual chaos" of his time. Today's cultural commissars do not—not yet, anyway—control any governments or police forces. But the intellectual and spiritual chaos they endorse is potentially as disruptive and paralyzing as any brand of nihilism. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt once described totalitarianism as an "experiment against reality." Among other things, she had in mind the peculiar mixture of gullibility and cynicism that totalitarian movements inspire, an amalgam that fosters an intellectual twilight in which people believe "everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and nothing was true." It is in this sense that the cultural relativists of today display a totalitarian cast of mind. Their efforts to disestablish the intellectual tradition of the West are so many experiments against reality: the reality of our cultural and spiritual legacy.

It is a simple matter to give examples and describe the effects of such experiments against reality. But uncovering their precise nature—what, finally, motivates them, what they portend—is more difficult. They are as amorphous as they are widespread and virulent. It is easy to get lost in the maze of competing barbarisms: deconstruction, structuralism, postcolonialism, and queer theory for breakfast, postdeconstructive cultural studies and Lacanian feminism for lunch. Who can say what will be served up for dinner? The menu is endless, and endlessly hermetic. And yet there are recurrent themes, arguments, and attitudes. Above all there are unifying suppositions, often only half-articulated, about the stability of human nature, the meaning of tradition, the scope and criteria of knowledge. In an appendix to his *Essays on European Literature*, Curtius again provides a striking counterexample to today's received wisdom when he speaks of the "essential connection between love and knowledge" and emphasizes the critic's *receptivity*, his subservience to the reality he seeks to understand. "Reception is the essential condition for perception," Curtius writes, "and this then leads to conception." At a time when the hubris of the critic is matched only by the fatuousness of his theories, Curtius's insistence that knowledge owes a perpetual debt to reality—that scholarship, as he puts it, "must always remain objective"—sounds a refreshingly discordant note.

Today, the very idea that there might be something distinctive about the Western cultural tradition—something, moreover, eminently worth preserving—is under attack on several fronts.

In some ways, Curtius's reflections on the responsibilities of scholarship are—or would once have been—commonplace. But they touch on a matter of critical importance for anyone concerned with the future of the European past. Behind Curtius's insistence on the essentially receptive attitude of the critic is an acknowledgment that reality ultimately transcends our efforts to master it. It is reality that speaks to us, not we who lecture it. At the same time, Curtius's entire commitment to scholarship and "the preservation of Western culture" rests on a faith that the search for truth is not futile. If we must wait upon truth, we do not wait in vain. This twofold attitude—an acceptance of human limitation together with an affirmation of human capability—underlies his scholarly endeavor and links it to the great humanistic tradition of which he is a late, eloquent spokesman. It is also,

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finally, what sets him at odds with the enemies of that tradition.

There are two large questions at issue in this conflict: the relation between truth and cultural value, and the authority of tradition as the custodian of mankind's spiritual aspirations.

Of the many things that have characterized the main current of European culture, perhaps none has been more central than faith in the liberating power of truth. At least since Plato described truth as the "food of the soul" and linked it to the idea of the good, truth has had, in the West, a normative as well as an intellectual component. In this sense, knowing the truth has been held to be not only a matter of comprehension but also enlightenment, its attainment a moral as well as a cognitive achievement. The habit of judging "according to right reason," in Aristotle's formula, was seen to be as much an expression of character as intelligence. Saying yes to the truth involved ascent as much as assent. Philosophy, the "love of wisdom," proposed freedom not simply from ignorance but also, centrally, from illusion. "You shall know the truth," the Gospel of St. John tells us, "and the truth shall set you free." The optimism inherent in this imperative underlies not only the main springs of Western religion but also the development of its science and political institutions from the time of the Greeks through the Enlightenment and beyond.

Of course, this edifying picture has had plenty of competition. "What is truth?" asked Pontius Pilate as he washed his hands, thus providing a role model for countless generations of cynics. At the end of *The Republic*, Socrates says that the philosopher's "main concern" should be "to make a reasoned choice between the better and the worse life, with reference to the nature of the soul." But earlier in that dialogue he admits that many who devote themselves too single-mindedly to philosophy become cranks if not, indeed, *pamponērous*, "thoroughly depraved." The character of Thrasymachus, taunting Socrates with the declaration that "justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger," provides an enduring image of the kind—or one of the kinds—of moral nihilist whose influence Plato feared.

In the modern age, no one has carried forward Thrasymachus's challenge more subtly or more radically than Friedrich Nietzsche. In a celebrated epigram, Nietzsche wrote that "we have art lest we perish from the truth." His disturbing thought was that art, with its fondness for illusion and make-believe, did not so much grace life as provide grateful distraction from life's horrors. But Nietzsche's real radicalism came

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in the way that he attempted to read life *against* truth. Inverting the Platonic-Christian doctrine that linked truth with the good and the beautiful, he declared truth to be "ugly." Suspecting that "the will to truth might be a concealed will to death," Nietzsche boldly demanded that "the value of truth must for once be experimentally *called into question*." This is as it were the moral source of all those famous Nietzschean formulae about truth and knowledge—that "there are no facts, only interpretations," that "to tell the truth is simply to lie according to a fixed convention," etc. Indeed, as Nietzsche recognized, his effort to provide a genealogy of truth led directly "back to the moral problem: *Why have morality at all* when life, nature, and history are 'not moral'?"

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Nietzsche's influence on contemporary intellectual life cannot be overstated. "I am dynamite," Nietzsche declared shortly before sinking into irretrievable madness. He was right. In one way or another, his example is an indispensable background to almost every destructive intellectual movement this century has witnessed. As the philosopher Richard Rorty enthusiastically put it, "it was Nietzsche who first explicitly suggested that we drop the whole idea of 'knowing the truth.'"

It can be argued that part of Nietzsche's influence has been due to misunderstanding. It was not entirely Nietzsche's fault, for example, that he became in effect the house philosopher for the Nazis. But it is not possible to exonerate Nietzsche entirely on that score, either. He would have been repelled by National Socialism, had he lived to see it, especially its anti-Semitism and *lumpen* elements. But his consistent glorification of violence, his doctrine of "the will to power," his distinction between "master" and "slave" morality, his image of the *Übermensch*: they all played so neatly into the Nazis' hands precisely because their brutality nicely answered to the brutality of the Nazis' requirements. Even if Nietzsche meant something different from what the Nazis meant, there was an element of like appealing to like when it came to their use of his rhetoric.

Nietzsche's intellectual and moral influence on our contemporaries betrays similar complexities. One imagines that Nietzsche would have loathed such poseurs as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault (to name only two). Such bad taste! Such bad writing! But their philosophies are inconceivable without Nietzsche's example. And, once again, there is a great deal in Nietzsche's thought that answers to the requirements of deconstruction, poststructuralism, and their many offshoots and permutations. Nietzsche's obsession with power once again is central, in particular his subjugation of truth to scenarios of power. (Foucault's insistence that truth is always a coefficient of "regimes of power" is simply Nietzsche done over in black leather.) And where would the deconstructionists be without Nietzsche's endlessly quoted declaration that truth is "a moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms." A deconstructionist without the word "metonymy" is a pitiful thing, like a dog missing its favorite bone.

Conceptually, such Nietzsche-isms as "everything praised as moral is identical in essence with everything immoral" add little to the message that Thrasymachus had for us twenty-five hundred years ago. They are the predictable product of nominalism and the desire to say something shocking, a perennial combination among the impatient. Nietzsche's real radicalism arises from the grandiosity of his hubris. His militant "God is dead" atheism had its corollary: the dream of absolute self-creation, of a new sort of human being strong enough to dispense with inherited morality and create, in Nietzsche's phrase, its "own new tables of what is good." This ambition is at the root of Nietzsche's ultimate goal of effecting a "transvaluation of all values." It is also what makes his philosophy such an efficient solvent of traditional moral thinking.

When Derrida leaves Plato's pharmacy and goes into a Parisian one, he depends mightily on the fact that there is *an outside to language, that when he asks for* aspirine *he will not be given* arsenic *instead.*

At least, that is the *substance* of what makes Nietzsche philosophical "dynamite." The detonator is supplied by Nietzsche's remarkable style. As a stylist Nietzsche had many faults. His rhetoric can be as grandiose as his megalomania. But almost everyone agrees that Nietzsche was an extraordinarily seductive, if sometimes hectoring, writer. And it must be said, too, that Nietzsche's rhetorical excesses were generally at the service of an abiding seriousness about

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deep issues. He may have been wrong about a great many things—about the most important things—but he was never frivolous. Unfortunately, many of Nietzsche's imitators and disciples have copied the extravagance of his manner while neglecting his ultimately serious purpose. Indeed, his example has done a great deal to enfranchise frivolity as an acceptable academic tic. When combined with the polysyllabic portentousness of Nietzsche's disciple Martin Heidegger—another major influence on the style of deconstruction—the effect is deadly: portentous frivolity, the worst of both worlds. Nietzsche once wrote that "one does not only wish to be understood when one writes, one wishes just as surely *not* to be understood." How he would have rued that sentence had he foreseen the rebarbative quality of the academic prose his writings helped to inspire!

One could easily fill a book—many books—with examples of the most extreme sort: they are the stuff that Ph.D. theses in the humanities are made of today. But let us confine ourselves to a couple of characteristic examples from one of Nietzsche's most influential heirs, the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Inspired by Nietzsche, Derrida is always talking about "games" and "play." So he begins his book *Dissemination* with this sentence: "This (therefore) will not have been a book." "Therefore," indeed. This is followed by a . . . no, not an explanation, but a sort of exfoliation, a luxurience of verbal curlicues designed not to clear things up but to festoon the initial obscurity with cleverness. Such "games" pall quickly, of course, and so Derrida, like so many of his epigoni, tries to spice things up by injecting sex-talk wherever possible He can't mention Rousseau without dilating on masturbation, reflect on writing without bringing in incest, and so on. It's what D. H. Lawrence called sex in the head: an academic's frenetically anemic effort to demonstrate that there is blood in his (or her) veins.

It can all be pretty distasteful. But the real obscenity is practiced upon language. Here is a relatively mild passage from the beginning of "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida's famous essay on the *Phaedrus*:

> A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception. . . . If reading and writing are one, as is easily thought these days, if reading *is* writing, this oneness designates neither undifferentiated (con)fusion nor identity at perfect rest; the *is* that couples reading with writing must rip apart.
>
> One must then, in a single gesture, but doubled, read and write. And that person would have understood nothing of the game who, at this, would feel himself authorized merely to add on; that is, to add any old thing. . . . The reading or writing supplement must be rigorously prescribed, but by the necessities of a *game*, by the logic of *play*, signs to which the system of all textual powers must be accorded and attuned.

Perhaps this is the appropriate place to recall Chesterton's definition of madness as "using mental activity so as to reach mental helplessness." If one penetrates behind the skeins of Derrida's rhetoric, a moment's thought will show that the "rigorously prescribed" logic of his play is completely short-circuited by a simple fact: that reading is not, as it happens, the same thing as writing. Never was, never will be.

But that is the way it is with deconstruction. Derrida's most famous sentence is undoubtedly *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, "there is nothing outside the text." This is shorthand for denying that words can refer to a reality beyond words, for denying that truth has its measure in something beyond the web of our language games. It is, of course, a simple matter to *say* "There is nothing outside the text." It has a clever, radical sound

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to it. But is it true? If so, then there is at least one thing "outside" the text, namely the truth of the statement "There is nothing outside the text."

It is the same with all such pronouncements: "There is no such thing as literal meaning" (Stanley Fish), "All readings are misreadings" (Jonathan Culler), "Truth . . . cannot exist independently of the human mind" (Richard Rorty). Or, in slightly less staccato form, here is Fredric Jameson:

> The very problem of a relationship between thoughts and words betrays a metaphysics of "presence," and implies an illusion that universal substances exist, in which we come face to face once and for all with objects; that meanings exist, such that it ought to be possible to "decide" whether they are initially verbal or not; that there is such a thing as knowledge which one can acquire in some tangible and permanent way.

Not only are all these statements essentially self-refuting—does Stanley Fish literally mean "There is no such thing as literal meaning"?—but they also have the handicap of being continually refuted by experience. When Derrida leaves Plato's pharmacy and goes into a Parisian one, he depends mightily on the fact that there *is* an outside to language, that when he asks for *aspirine* he will not be given *arsenic* instead.

A great deal of Derrida's philosophy depends on the linguistic accident that the French verb *différer* means both "to differ" and "to defer." Out of this pedestrian fact he has spun a dizzying argument, the upshot of which is that the meaning of any text is perpetually put off, *deferred*. But, of course, if some unscrupulous pharmacist were to substitute arsenic for aspirin, Derrida would learn to reconnect the signifier with the signified right speedily, and he would lament, in the time that remained to him, his apostasy from the logocentric "nostalgia" for the "metaphysics of presence."

It is often pointed out today that deconstruction and structuralism are old hat, that the parade of academic fashion has passed on to other entertainments: cultural studies and various neo-Marxist hybrids of "theory" and the politics of grievance. This is partly true. It is certainly the case that the terms "deconstruction" and "structuralism" no longer have the cachet they possessed a decade ago. Nor does the name "Derrida" automatically produce the reverence and wonder among graduate students that it once did. ("Foucault," however, seems to have retained its talismanic charm.) There are basically two reasons for this. The first has to do with the late Paul de Man, the Belgium-born Yale professor of comparative

Because there is "no such thing" as intrinsic value, there is at bottom no reason to respect the integrity of literature, philosophy, science, or any other intellectual pursuit.

literature, who in addition to being one of the most prominent practitioners of deconstruction, was—it was revealed in the late 1980s—an enthusiastic contributor to Nazi newspapers during World War II. That discovery, and above all the flood of obscurantist mendacity disgorged by the deconstructionist-structuralist brotherhood—not least by Derrida himself—to exonerate de Man, has cast a permanent shadow over deconstruction's status as a widely accepted instrument of intellectual liberation. The second reason is simply that, like any academic fashion, deconstruction's methods and vocabulary, once so novel and forbidding, have gradually become part of the common coin of academic discourse.

In fact, though, this very process of assimilation has assured the continuing influence of deconstruction and structuralism. The *terms* "deconstruction" and "structuralism" are not invoked as regularly today as they once were; but their fundamental ideas about language, truth, and morality are

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more widespread than ever. Once at home mostly in philosophy and literature departments, their nihilistic tenets are cropping up further and further afield: in departments of history, sociology, political science, and architecture; in law schools and—God help us—business schools; and, outside the academy, in museums and other cultural institutions. Indeed, deconstructive themes and presuppositions have increasingly become part of the general intellectual atmosphere: absorbed to such an extent that, like the ideas of psychoanalysis, they float almost unnoticed, part of the ambient spiritual pollution of our time.

Though the language of deconstruction and structuralism is barbarous, the appeal of the doctrines is not hard to understand. It is basically a Nietzschean appeal. As the English philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch observed, "the new anti-metaphysical metaphysic promises to unburden the intellectuals and set them free to play. Man has now 'come of age' and is strong enough to get rid of his past."

That, at least, is the idea—the promise issued but, like meaning in a deconstructionist's fantasy, always deferred. As Murdoch notes, part of what is objectionable in the deconstructivist-structuralist ethos "is the damage done to other modes of thinking and to literature." Dissolving everything in a sea of unanchored signifiers, deconstruction encourages us to blur fundamental distinctions: distinctions between intellectual disciplines, between fact and fiction, between right and wrong. Because there is "no such thing" as intrinsic value, there is at bottom no reason to respect the integrity of literature, philosophy, science, or any other intellectual pursuit. All become fodder for the deconstructionist's "play"—or perhaps "folly" would be a more appropriate term. The crucial thing that is lost is truth: the ideal, in Murdoch's words, of "language as truthful, where 'truthful' means faithful to, engaging intelligently and responsibly with, a reality which is beyond us."

Deconstruction is an evasion of reality. In this sense it may be described as a reactionary force. But because deconstruction operates by subversion, its evasions are at the same time an attack: an attack on the cogency of language and the moral and intellectual claims that language has codified in tradition. The subversive element inherent in the deconstructive enterprise is another reason that it has exercised such a mesmerizing spell on intellectuals eager to demonstrate their radical *bona fides*. Because it attacks the intellectual foundations of the established order, deconstruction promises its adherents not only an emancipation from the responsibilities of truth but also the prospect of engaging in a species of radical activism. A blow against the legitimacy of language, they imagine, is at the same time a blow against the legitimacy of the tradition in which language lives and has meaning. They are not mistaken about this. For it is by undercutting the idea of truth that the decontructionist also undercuts the idea of value, including established social, moral, and political values. And it is here, as Murdoch points out, that "the deep affinity, the holding hands under the table, between structuralism and Marxism becomes intelligible." Most deconstructionists would seem to be unlikely revolutionaries; but their attack on the inherited values of our culture are as radical and potentially destabilizing as anything devised by Mr. Molotov.

The deconstructionist impulse comes in a variety of flavors, from bitter to cloying, and can be made to serve a wide range of philosophical outlooks. That is part of what makes it so dangerous. One of the most beguiling and influential American deconstructionists is Richard Rorty. Once upon a time, Rorty was a serious analytic philosopher. Since the late 1970s, however, he has increasingly busied himself explaining why philosophy must jettison its concern with outmoded things like truth and human nature. Instead, philosophy should turn itself into a form of literature or—as he sometimes puts it—"fantasizing." He is set on "blurring the literature-philosophy distinc-

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tion and promoting the idea of a seamless, undifferentiated 'general text,'" in which, say, Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, a television program, and a French novel might coalesce into a fit object of hermeneutical scrutiny.

That's the problem with liberal ironists: they are ironical about everything except their own irony, and are serious about tolerating everything except seriousness.

Thus it is that Rorty believes that "the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress." (One does not, incidentally, have to believe that sermons or treatises were ever "the principal vehicles of moral change and progress" to be convinced that novels, movies, and TV programs are nothing of the sort now.)

As almost goes without saying, Rorty's attack on philosophy and his celebration of culture as an "undifferentiated 'general text'" have earned him many honors. In the early 1980s, he left his professorship at Princeton for an even grander one at the University of Virginia; he is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award; and he has lately emerged as one of those "all-purpose intellectuals . . . ready to offer a view on pretty much anything" that he extols in his book *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982).

Rorty has written enthusiastically about Derrida as someone who "simply drops theory" for the sake of amoral "fantasizing" about his philosophical predecessors, "playing with them, giving free rein to the trains of association they produce." He himself strives to follow this procedure. He does not, however, call himself a deconstructionist. That might be too off-putting. Instead, he calls himself a "pragmatist" or, more recently, a "liberal ironist." What he wants, as he explained in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), his first foray into postphilosophical waters, is "philosophy without epistemology," that is, philosophy without truth, and especially without Truth with a capital *T*.

In brief, Rorty wants a philosophy (if we can still call it that) which "aims at continuing the conversation rather than at discovering truth." He can manage to abide "truths" with a small *t* and in the plural: truths that we don't take too seriously and wouldn't dream of foisting upon others: truths, in others words, that are true merely by linguistic convention. In a word, truths that are not true. What he cannot bear—and cannot bear to have us bear—is the idea of Truth that is somehow more than that.

Rorty generally tries to maintain a chummy, easygoing persona. This is consistent with his role as a "liberal ironist," i.e., someone who thinks that "cruelty is the worst thing we can do" (the liberal part) but who, believing that moral values are utterly contingent, thinks that what counts as "cruelty" is a sociological or linguistic construct. (This is where the irony comes in: "I do not think," he writes, "there are any plain moral facts out there . . . nor any neutral ground on which to stand and argue that either torture or kindness are [*sic*] preferable to the other.") Accordingly, one thing that is certain to earn Rorty's contempt is the spectacle of someone without sufficient contempt for the truth. "You can still find philosophy professors," he tells us witheringly, "who will solemnly tell you that they are seeking *the truth*, not just a story or a consensus but an honest-to-God, down-home, accurate representation of the way the world is." That's the problem with liberal ironists: they are ironical about everything except their own irony, and are serious about tolerating everything except seriousness.

As Rorty is quick to point out, the "bedrock metaphysical issue" here is whether we have any non-linguistic access to reality. Does language "go all the way down" (*il n'y*

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a pas de hors-texte)? Or does language point to a reality beyond itself, a reality that exercises a legitimate claim on our attention and provides a measure and limit for our descriptions of the world? In other words, is truth something that we invent? Or something that we discover? The main current of Western culture has overwhelmingly endorsed the latter view. For example, the "receptivity" that Curtius insisted upon for the critic is unintelligible without some such presupposition. But Rorty wants us to drop "the notion of truth as correspondence with reality altogether" and realize that there is "no difference that makes a difference" between the statement "it works because it's true" and "it's true because it works." He tells us that "Sentences like . . . 'Truth is independent of the human mind' are simply platitudes used to inculcate . . . the common sense of the West." Of course, Rorty is right that such sentences "inculcate . . . the common sense of the West." He is even right that they are "platitudes." The statement "The sun rises in the East" is another such platitude. But even platitudes can be true.

Rorty cavalierly tells us that he does "not have much use for notions like 'objective value' and 'objective truth.'" But then the list of things that Rorty does not have much use for is very long. For example, he wants us to get rid of the idea that "the self or the world has an intrinsic nature" because it is "a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation." Since "socialization" (like language) "goes all the way down," there is for Rorty no such thing as a self apart from the social roles it inhabits: "the word 'I,'" he writes, "is as hollow as the word 'death.'" ("Death," he assures us, is an "empty" term.)

Rorty looks forward to a culture—he calls it a "liberal utopia"—in which the "Nietzschean metaphors" of self-creation are finally "literalized," i.e., made real. For philosophers, or people who used to be philosophers, this would mean a culture that "took for granted that philosophical problems are as temporary as poetic problems, that there are no problems which bind the generations together in a single natural kind called 'humanity.'" ("Humanity" is another one of those notions that Rorty cannot think about without scare quotes.)

Rorty recognizes that most people ("most nonintellectuals") are not yet liberal ironists. Many people still believe that there is such a thing as truth independent of their thoughts. Some even continue to entertain the idea that their identity is more than a distillate of biological and sociological accidents. Rorty knows this. Whether he also knows that his own position as a liberal ironist crucially depends on most people being *non*-ironists is another question. One suspects not. In any event, he is clearly impatient with what he refers to as "a particular historically conditioned and possibly transient" view of the world, i.e., the preironical view for which things like truth and morality still matter. Rorty, in short, is a connoisseur of contempt. He could hardly be more explicit about this. He tells us in the friendliest possible way that he wants us to "get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything* —our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance."

In his book *Overcoming Law* (1995), the jurist and legal philosopher Richard Posner criticizes Rorty for his "deficient sense of fact" and "his belief in the plasticity of human nature," noting that both are "typical of modern philosophy." They are typical, anyway, of certain influential strains of modern philosophy. And it is in the union of these two things—a deficient sense of fact and a belief in the plasticity of human nature—that Nietzsche's legacy bears its most poisonous fruit. When Rorty, expatiating on the delights of his liberal utopia, says that "a postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable," he perhaps speaks truer than he purposed. For despite the tenacity of non-irony in many sections of society, there is much in our culture—the culture of Europe writ large—that shows

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the disastrous effects of Nietzsche's dream of a postmetaphysical, ironized society of putative self-creators. And to say that such a society would be "equally desirable" as a postreligious one is also to say that it would be equally *un*desirable.

Whether our culture really is postreligious is still very much an open question. That liberal ironists such as Richard Rorty make do without religion does not tell us very much about the matter. In an essay called "The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society" the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski observed that the idea that there are no fundamental disputes about moral and spiritual values is "an intellectualist self-delusion, a half-conscious inclination by Western academics to treat the values they acquired from their liberal education as something natural, innate, corresponding to the normal disposition of human nature." Since liberal ironists such as Richard Rorty do not believe that anything is natural or innate, Kolakowski's observation has to be slightly modified to fit him. But his general point remains, namely that "the net result of education freed of authority, tradition, and dogma is moral nihilism." Kolakowski readily admits that the belief in a unique core of personality "is not a scientifically provable truth." But he argues that, "without this belief, the notion of personal dignity and of human rights is an arbitrary concoction, suspended in the void, indefensible, easy to be dismissed," and hence prey to totalitarian doctrines.

The Promethean dreams of writers such as Derrida and Rorty depend critically on their denying the reality of anything that transcends the prerogatives of their efforts at self-creation. Traditionally, the recognition of such realities has been linked with a recognition of the sacred. And in this sense, as Kolakowski argues in "The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture," "culture, when it loses its sacred sense, loses all sense." He continues:

> With the disappearance of the sacred, which imposed limits to the perfection that could be attained by the profane, arises one of the most dangerous illusions of our civilization—the illusion that there are no limits to the changes that human life can undergo, that society is "in principle" an endlessly flexible thing, and that to deny this flexibility and this perfectibility is to deny man's total autonomy and thus to deny man himself.

It is a curious irony that self-creators from Nietzsche through Rorty are reluctant children of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment sought to emancipate man by liberating reason; but it has turned out that reason liberated from tradition grows rancorous and irrational. True, we would not wish to do without the benefits of the Enlightenment. As the sociologist Edward Shils pointed out in *Tradition* (1981), the Enlightenment's "tradition of emancipation from traditions is . . . among the precious achievements of our civilization. It has made citizens out of slaves and serfs. It has opened the imagination and the reason of human beings." Nevertheless, to the extent that it turns against the tradition that gives rise to it, Enlightenment rationalism degenerates into a force destructive of culture and the manifold directives that culture has bequeathed us. As Shils goes on to observe, "the destruction or discrediting of these cognitive, moral, metaphysical, and technical charts is a step into chaos. Destructive criticism which is an extension of reasoned criticism, aggravated by hatred, annuls the benefits of reason and restrained emancipation." In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein remarked that "all philosophical problems have the form 'I have lost my way.'" Today, when so much of intellectual life has degenerated into an experiment against reality, perhaps the primary task that faces us is recovering a sense that many of the liberations we crave serve chiefly to compound the depth of our loss.

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Robert Hughes's Amerika

by Michael J. Lewis

What is American about American art? The first time I posed this question, I discovered it was forbidden. I had used it at the conclusion of a graduate student's examination, giving her an opportunity to comment on broad trends over the course of American art history. I thought it a nice catch-all, letting the student expand on what she knew about art education, patronage, subject matter, and so forth. Through sheer coincidence, the question came up at a dinner party several days later. A colleague mentioned in passing that we were better off for no longer worrying about things such as "what is American about American art?" Having used just this exact wording, I was genuinely surprised, and asked why this was wrong. The answer was that it was unacceptable to search for national characteristics in art, that it was jingoistic, ominously close to the *Volksgeist* that Nazi artists sought to celebrate. "We haven't done that for years," I was told.

Apparently, however, it is again permissible to look for American qualities in our art—so long as these qualities are the usual suspects of modern scholarship. In *American Visions*,[1] an eight-episode television series now airing on PBS, Robert Hughes confronts the full pageant of American art, from its Puritan origins to the art-funding wars of the present. Through it all, the fundamental Americanness of American art is taken for granted. The treatment is in every sense panoramic, as camera-equipped helicopters race over the crests of mountains to the swell of orchestral music. It has *gravitas*, but user-friendly *gravitas*, and so we are treated to frequent shots of Hughes on the road, chatting informally with us as he tools around in his spiffy convertible. We are on board for an epic, we learn, but we have a genial tour guide, the *Odyssey* with a designated driver.

Hughes points out from the start that *American Visions* is not a survey of American art. Instead, he poses a question: "What can we say about Americans from the things and images they have made?" That is, he wants to ask the questions of sociologists and political scientists while using the methods of art historians. Hughes makes much of his outsider status. He came to America from Australia in 1970, joining the staff of *Time*, where he soon emerged as an engaging art critic with a rollicking delivery. His chief interests were modernism and the art market, which are reflected in his best-known work, the book and video series *The Shock of the New*. His newest work, he informs us, began as "a love-letter to Amer-

1 *American Visions*, written and narrated by Robert Hughes. The series is a co-production of the BBC and Time Inc. in association with WNET (PBS and Warner Home Video, $149.95 for the eight-volume set). A companion volume to the series, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, by Robert Hughes, has been published by Alfred A. Knopf (635 pages, $65).

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ica." Somewhere along the way, it seems to have turned into a "Dear John" letter.

The companion volume to the series follows a straightforward chronological approach, a parade of selected artists whose careers unfold in the Darwinian chain of the modern art history lecture. The television series is much freer. With a strict chronology, the first episode would have been a slow crawl through a century of un-telegenic colonial limners. Instead, Hughes launches the series by considering American classical architecture, allowing him to look forward and back, developing the themes of American identity, its political foundations, and its tradition of crusading idealism. But the columns we see at the outset prove to be the sham casino classicism of Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, setting a tone of skepticism that remains the unwavering mood over the next eight hours of the series.

Hughes's wry encounter with Las Vegas is his response to the dilemma of the television art documentary: paintings are not exciting to watch on a television set. Nor do they lend themselves to reproduction on a fuzzy, flickering tube, making discussions of technique or color nearly impossible. But Hughes works relentlessly to open up the screen with live action. He seems to have had in mind Ken Burns's celebrated Civil War series, in which still photographs alternated with vivid interviews. Thus when Hughes invokes America's dissenting Protestant tradition, he interviews some surviving Shakers (although his Amish subjects, are apparently more discriminating, and hurry away from him). And when he contemplates "The Wilderness and the West" in episode three, he visits the Grand Canyon and is later delighted by an annual reenactment of Custer's Last Stand. When he finally moves into the twentieth century and can draw on documentary footage of Alfred Stieglitz, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others, we sense his sigh of relief.

The consequence is that Hughes very seldom lets you look at a painting for more than a moment. He seems to distrust their ability to hold your interest. Even when showing Winslow Homer's views of his wave-tormented Maine coast, he constantly intercuts footage of actual waves, as if the point were the water, not the painting. The result is a focus on the *subject matter* of paintings, and not on their artistic conception. Of course, it is possible to discuss paintings intelligently on television, but it requires a high degree of sympathy, a quality in which the cranky Hughes is rather tapped out. Instead of relishing the paintings, Hughes looks for the chance to make his polemical point—and to score with a cocky epigram—and then he is off to his next artist.

Along the way, we encounter many of the central figures of American art. Some are in the series because they need to be, such as Thomas Cole, although Hughes clearly cannot abide his moralism. Hughes's taste is rather different. His pantheon includes John Singleton Copley, John James Audubon, Thomas Eakins, Charles Sheeler, and, above all, Edward Hopper. He celebrates the empiricists, preferring men who painted reality to men with agendas—whether political or cosmological.

As a host, Hughes has a certain pugnacious charm. His characteristic move is a frowning stride around a painting before turning to the camera to deliver his bemused summation. In these set-piece reviews, he can be enormously entertaining. Hughes is an excellent debunker, a Mencken at detecting puffed-up reputations. The series is filled with little polished gems of cynicism, such as this one on the artists' colony at Taos, New Mexico: "The Taos of today isn't much like the Taos of the 1920s. It's become a High Sierra theme park, full of faith healers, wannabe witches, dealers in multicultural kitsch, all flashing their silver and turquoise concho belts at one another." (The tone of this passage is pure Tom Wolfe—note the touch of the concho belt—which Hughes probably recognizes since he takes pains to distance himself from Wolfe: elsewhere Wolfe's work is described as "silly.")

Hughes is also good at evoking the thrust

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and parry of the artist-patron relationship. This reflects his decades of observing the art market, giving him a jaded view of the American patron and his motives, which he then projects backward through time. Here is Hughes, sitting in the Vanderbilts' dining room in the Breakers at Newport and imagining the thought process of the nouveaux riches of the Gilded Age:

> Suppose you wake up one morning with an idea and you say to yourself, "by God, I shall have a cottage by the sea and in that cottage there will be a dining room with a ceiling forty-five feet high and the walls sheathed in rose alabaster the color of raw steak." You still may get it wrong, because your next-door neighbors who own the other half of America may have just finished their dining room in marble the color of poached fish. So you must get an architect to fantasize on your behalf, secure in the knowledge that because he is working for practically everybody else in your class, he won't get his symbols crossed. He will maintain a seamless etiquette of shared ostentation, with variants.

In this lively, colloquial chattiness, Hughes echoes the breezy format of *Time*, which is even breezier now than when his stint began in 1970. Confined to six-hundred-word reviews, he learned to make every phrase count. In the nutshell of the short paragraph, Hughes, like Hamlet, is a king of infinite space. Every artist is tagged with an arresting, one-line review: James Rosenquist and his *F-111* ("a Pollock in pasta"), Marcel Duchamp ("a great abattoir of sacred cows"), George Bellows ("low life and high testosterone"). Hughes's prose contains so much condensed imagery that it is like an overrich sauce served by itself. But a tone that grabs your attention on one page is not necessarily the tone to sustain interest for eight hours, just as the most amusing barroom wit is not necessarily the best companion for a cross-country drive.

All things considered, Hughes has written a very competent art history survey. This is apparent in the companion volume, which fills in the gaps of the more impressionistic television series. The principal figures are there, the assessments generally reflect modern consensus, and even his puncturing of inflated reputations is hardly as naughty as he implies. He risks no *fatwa* by blaspheming against Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still. And his portentous revelations about his favorite artists ("Hopper is an artist I trust *implicitly*") are scarcely the stuff of controversy. What is rather surprising, in the end, is that there are no surprises. Throughout the course of the book, Hughes reveals no notable personal idiosyncrasy, no oddity of taste—of the sort that a strong-minded, independent personality might be expected to show; nowhere do his insights inspire us to take a second look at an artist. Behind Hughes's take-no-prisoners delivery is the cautious syllabus of a rather bookish, middle-aged scholar.

Hughes, however, is out for bigger game than mere artists. In the third episode, "The Wilderness and the West," we enter the ideological heart of the series. This begins, innocently enough, with the American tradition of landscape painting, and the formation of the Hudson River School. Established in the 1820s by Cole and others, this movement was nostalgic and retrospective, a lament over the retreat of the forests and the advance of the steam engine. Central to it was the idea that the American landscape was unique, geologically and spiritually, and that it offered deep moral lessons. For Hughes, this is anything but benign. He is alarmed by American reverence for the landscape, which he invariably connects to violence—and sordid commercial motives. When we meet Daniel Boone, Hughes describes him journalistically as "frontier scout, Indian killer and real estate dealer," apparently in order of increasing offensiveness.

The Hudson River School gave artistic expression to what Hughes regards as America's Original Sin, the myth of American exceptionalism. The idea that America had a unique, God-given destiny among

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nations is to Hughes a malignant credo, because it "required constant fueling by paranoia to keep it at the boiling point." Unfortunately, it is difficult to mine the serene landscapes of Thomas Cole for paranoia. This Hughes finds in the art of the American West, with its images of beleaguered whites rallying themselves for one final stand against the onslaught of demonized Indians. For him these paintings are primal documents of the American character, testifying to a strand of xenophobic violence that is never far from the surface, although its targets have shifted over time. Thus in the nineteenth century it raged against Indians; at the start of this century it turned against immigrants; in the 1950s there was an embarrassment of rages—and not only against Communists, for "American hatred of homosexuals ran particularly hot." And now, with the end of the Cold War, new enemies must be discovered within.

Here, at last, is the punch line of Hughes's love letter: America has produced a bouquet of hatreds in order to sustain the myth of its superiority. And this myth exists not only to comfort us but also to provide the ideological cover for an agenda of imperialist expansion. One of the oddest parts of Hughes's argument is the idea that art plays a "considerable role" in promoting the agenda of expansion. (Perhaps that accounts for all the art-loving American imperialists one meets.) Here is Hughes on the link between imperialism, violence, and art:

> Manifest destiny meant what it said, that it was manifest, obvious beyond all argument, that Empire had to expand beyond the Mississippi, and not stop rolling until it met the Pacific, and whatever you found along the way was yours by absolute right . . . and if the Indians fought back, they weren't just resisting invaders; they were up against history itself. And to see yourself as a force of history is to be absolved from both pity and guilt. Manifest destiny was America's great myth of redemptive violence and art played a considerable role in promoting it.

Absolved from pity and guilt? Has any country in history ever cradled a public life as self-questioning and self-criticizing as that of America? The pity and guilt industry of modern America did not begin with Hughes—it goes back, time out of mind, through the muckraking journalists, the literature of abolition, the social activism of the Quakers, and ultimately to the world view of the first European colonists. It is a primal American habit of mind, as primal as exceptionalism itself, from which it derives its energy. Even Custer, presumably one of those forces "absolved from pity," penned his own protests against the Bureau of Indian Affairs. But Hughes will have none of it.

Here is where his use of art is not only dishonest, but also rather lazy. If he were serious about indicting American policy against Indians in a history program, he would need to tell of changing policies, broken treaties, attacks and reprisals, and a vast apparatus of charitable and educational efforts by whites. The story would be a tragedy, but a complex one. But in this series, everything unfolds with the simplicity of a medieval morality play in which the devil is clearly labeled—in this case with a blue cavalry uniform. All Hughes need do is show a painting of a cavalry attack and intone that "the American government preferred [Indians] dead." He takes American perfidy as a thing settled beyond argument, at least in polite society.

Hughes's America is the "Amerika" of the 1960s, a corrupt, violent enterprise that is flawed in some fundamental and irreparable way. The idea that there might be a positive side to it, and that American idealism might inspire acts of sacrifice or heroism, is something that he would prefer to ignore. In fact, the idea seems to irritate him, and his reflex when encountering such an act is to find something snide to say. Here is how he describes the entry of America into the First World War: "Patriots kicking dachshunds to death in the streets." Even the formation of Yellowstone Park, the culmination of a half-century of cultural ferment over the mean-

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ing of the wilderness to America, earns a sneer: it "did wonders for the cash flow of the Northern Pacific Railroad." In good 1960s fashion, the profit motive is seen to underpin everything.

In terms of art history, western artists such as Frederick Remington and Charles Schreyvogel were figures of secondary importance, illustrators rather than painters. Hughes, however, awards them much attention because they advance his hypothesis of "redemptive violence." But the encounter with the wilderness produced more than western genre merchants; it also led directly to the American landscaped park, an intellectual creation of the highest order, whose greatest exponent was Frederick Law Olmsted. For New York's Central Park, Olmsted and his partner, Calvert Vaux, borrowed from European theory, with its Romantic image of the landscape, but in characteristic American fashion they gave to landscape an additional moral and social meaning. Olmsted was a social critic before he turned to park design, and his landscape theory always gave broad scope to the social dimension, treating the park as a kind of civic forum for the mixing of urban classes. In the ensuing half-century, virtually every American city was reshaped by the ideas formulated at Central Park. With much justification, it is widely regarded as the most important American artistic achievement of the nineteenth century.

But not by Hughes. Olmsted goes unmentioned in the series and the book (although Vaux is mentioned in another context as a "minor figure"). This is a shocking gap. If Hughes were genuinely curious about what American art reveals about America, then he might have made land a connecting theme of the series. Not only painting, but the development of the American house, the picturesque suburb, the national highway system, even the environmental art movement—all are haunted by a peculiarly American view of the land. And a central story of American culture is revealed in the treatment of land, the perennial tug of war between the communitarian and the individualist impulse, played out in the detached house, with its spreading porch and enclosed yard.

In America's landscape-art runs a sensual strain that is absent from the rest of American art. Here was one area, at least, where tactile qualities, physical sensations, and even voluptuous qualities were admitted and granted free range. This is one strand of American art to which Hughes returns, again and again, without ever developing it as a theme in its own right: the anti-sensual strand that runs through American art. Saturated with seventeenth-century Protestant strictures against graven images, high art came late to America, and even then it had to creep in through a few restricted channels. At first came the portrait, the pinched and static likeness of colonial tradition, with none of the implied motion or energy of the contemporary Baroque art of Europe; later came the didactic image, of which the Hudson River School was the first comprehensive movement. Here American artists excelled at the minute description of physical reality (like their Dutch Protestant predecessors). But even here there prevailed a certain parsimony in the handling of paint, applied flatly and without bravura. The tradition of the human body as the central subject in art never achieved a foothold in America. There is more sheer tactile pleasure, more succulence, in a single Rubens nude than in almost all of American art. The chief exception to this pattern—the Aesthetic movement that culminated during the 1880s—was essentially a European movement, dominated by figures such as Whistler and Sargent, who were culturally Europeans.

From the beginning, the ideal of colonial painting was a surface of absolute smoothness, and a suppression of the visible brush stroke. The result was a portrait of outlines, with flat surfaces between; even artists who could do better would retrograde to the flat colonial style for clients who preferred it. The plastic description of the face as a three-dimensional form remained a luxury,

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and in one artist's price list, an additional charge was levied for modeling a face in the round. Even sculpture, which by definition exists in the round, tended toward anonymous surfaces. America's nineteenth-century neoclassical sculptors worked in Rome and Florence, making small models in plaster or clay which were turned over to their Italian assistants for execution in marble. The result was a series of statues whose flesh was strikingly impersonal and unyielding, bereft of surface interest. But then, the flesh in Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*, America's first celebrated nude, was not meant to give pleasure. It was enlisted in the service of a moral allegory, a narrative of a Greek captive who maintains her Christian modesty even while being exhibited naked in the slave market of Moslem Istanbul. Here was a nude as chaste as Doris Day, untouched—in theory, at least—by even the artist himself.

This impersonal working method has many analogues in American modernism: the objectivity of Precisionism, the anonymous surfaces of much Pop Art, the love of the air-brush and the silk screen, and even the Jacobin severity of today's political art. Common to all of this is a rather atrophied vocabulary for sensual qualities, a kind of cultural anorexia. And Americans' habit of judging things on the basis of outline and flat color—while denying themselves any tactile pleasure—extends beyond art. How else can one explain that quintessential artifact of American culture, the modern tomato?

In short, the American attitude toward art is about as far from Art for Art's Sake as could be. Whether the didactic uplift of a Hudson River School canvas, or the "consciousness-raising" of a Barbara Kruger epigram, the impulse is the same utilitarian conception of art. Even today, NEA art grants are as likely to be rationalized on the grounds of their educational value. After nearly four centuries, Americans are still faintly embarrassed when called upon to justify art, and invariably reach for things outside art in order to do so.

In the end, Hughes is not terribly interested in Art for Art's Sake either. Like the admirers of Powers's *Greek Slave*, he does not value the pleasure it gives but the story it tells. For him this is the familiar story of racism, xenophobia, homophobia. Here he reflects an age-old habit of American thought, an understanding of art as a means to an end rather than a goal in itself. And in this, after twenty-seven years at *Time*, he is more American than perhaps he can even realize.

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Edward Gibbon & the Enlightenment

by Keith Windschuttle

Few people today have read the whole of Edward Gibbon's masterpiece, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The full text, originally published between 1776 and 1788 in six volumes, and recently repackaged in three volumes for the Penguin Classics series,[1] comprises a daunting three-thousand-plus pages. However, many more have read excerpts or chapters selected to illustrate certain attributes of the author, especially his elegant literary style, his civilized values and the famous drollery of his wit. Gibbon is widely regarded as a typical man of the Enlightenment, dedicated to asserting the claims of reason over superstition, to understanding history as a rational process, and to replacing divine revelation with sociological explanations for the rise of religion. He is probably cited most often for his facetious observations about early Christianity. He is particularly severe on the miracles ascribed to the early monastics.

> The favourites of heaven were accustomed to cure inveterate diseases with a touch, a word, or a distant message; and to expel the most obstinate daemons from the souls, or bodies, which they possessed. They familiarly accosted, or imperiously commanded, the lions or serpents of the desert; infused vegetation into a sapless trunk; suspended iron on the surface of the water; passed the Nile on the back of a crocodile, and refreshed themselves in a fiery furnace. These extravagant tales, which display the fiction, without the genius, of poetry, have seriously affected the reason, and the morals, of the Christians. Their credulity debased and vitiated the faculties of the mind: they corrupted the evidence of history; and superstition gradually extinguished the hostile light of philosophy and science.

He tells the story of a Benedictine abbot who confessed: "'My vow of poverty has given me an hundred thousand crowns a year; my vow of obedience has raised me to the rank of a sovereign prince.'—I forget the consequences of his vow of chastity." He recounts how the practices of penance and the renunciation of the world produced one sect of Anchoret monks who "derived their name from their humble practice of grazing in the fields of Mesopotamia with the common herd." More grimly, he reports the murderous zeal with which Christians pursued those of the faith defined as heretics. He produces a document from an inquisition into the heresy of Eutyches in 448 A.D.: "'May those who divide Christ, be divided with the sword, may they be hewn in pieces, may they be burnt alive!' were the charitable wishes of a Christian synod."

In contrast to such passion, Gibbon prefers the philosophical temperament of ancient Athens, and he reserves his severest

1 *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Edward Gibbon. Edited and with an Introduction by David Womersley; Penguin Classics, 3,476 pages, $75 for the three-volume box set.

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rebukes for two of the men who broke "the golden chain of Platonic succession." The Archbishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, "a bold, bad man, whose hands were alternately polluted with gold, and with blood," in 389 A.D. sacked the edifices of the old Roman pagan religion, destroying the library of Alexandria and the two hundred thousand volumes of Greek and Roman literature deposited there by Marc Antony. "The compositions of ancient genius, so many of which have irretrievably perished, might surely have been excepted from the wreck of idolatry, for the amusement and instruction of succeeding ages; and either the zeal or the avarice of the archbishop, might have been satiated with the rich spoils, which were the reward of his victory." The Emperor Justinian in 529 A.D. suppressed the remaining Greek schools of philosophy in the name of Christ. "The Gothic arms were less fatal to the schools of Athens than the establishment of a new religion, whose ministers superseded the exercise of reason, resolved every question by an article of faith, and condemned the infidel or sceptic to eternal flames." In the summary of the fall of Rome that he gives midway through his opus, Gibbon includes "the abuse of Christianity" as one of the causes.

> The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloyster: a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion; and the soldiers pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes, who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity. . . . the church, and even the state, were distracted by religious factions, whose conflicts were sometimes bloody, and always implacable; the attention of the emperors was diverted from the camps to the synods; the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny; and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of their country.

Gibbon's modern reputation, accordingly, is largely that of an English Voltaire or Montesquieu, a man warning his country, at a time of its own rising imperial fortunes, of the need to throw off the shackles of superstition and the institutions that produced it. There are aspects of Gibbon's own career that support this impression. After he left Oxford, his real education took place at Lausanne in French Switzerland, and his first attempts at literary essays were written in French. His own great work, though inspired by his celebrated vision of barefoot monks chanting vespers in the Temple of Jupiter in the Capitol, actually began as an English attempt to better Montesquieu's earlier history of Rome, *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur of Rome and its Decline*.

Certainly, it was as an Enlightenment radical that Gibbon appeared to my generation who, as undergraduates in the 1960s, read him in the only version of his work then readily and cheaply available, the nine hundred page abridged edition published by Penguin under its old Pelican label. But now, reading the whole thing in this new Penguin Classics edition, a very different Gibbon emerges, one that suggests an alternative view of the Enlightenment in England as well.

Apart from publishing the full text, the major difference between the Penguin Classics and the old Pelican edition is that the former contains all Gibbon's footnotes, which are so extensive they consume roughly 20 percent of the total printed space. In a few places, they take up no less than three-quarters of the whole page. Gibbon uses his footnotes not only to source his references but also to make lengthy, sometimes acrimonious, sometimes witty, commentaries on the veracity of both his primary and secondary sources. (A sample: "The Dissertation of M. Biet seems to have been justly preferred to the discourse of his more celebrated competitor, the Abbé le Boeuf, an antiquarian, whose name was happily expressive of his talents.")

Those with the fortitude to read them

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will find that a considerable number of Gibbon's notes are devoted to disputing the French version of events, especially those of Baron Montesquieu and several other Enlightenment philosophes. Gibbon corrects Montesquieu in both his detail and his theory of history. He points out that Montesquieu is ignorant of the extent of the penetration Gothic barbarians had made of both Rome's territory and its mercenary forces—"the principal and immediate cause of the fall of the Western Empire." And as the Introduction by Penguin's editor, David Womersley, argues, and the text itself confirms in many places, Gibbon has a completely different interpretation of the nature of history. Montesquieu was committed to establishing that the surface milieu of history bore an underlying rationale and that there were general causes for the rise and fall of civilizations that transcended the influence of individuals. *The Decline and Fall*, however, is a demonstration that history is often driven by politics and sometimes by chance and that human passion usually presides over human reason. In their interpretations of the course of empire, the English and French Enlightenments are worlds apart.

Gibbon is well known for the aphorism that "history is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind," but this expression is rarely taken seriously because his own work appears to contradict it. *The Decline and Fall* contains some of the earliest versions of what later became the specializations of social history (in his analysis of the character of the barbarians of Germany and Siberia), economic history (the trade between Rome and China), and religious history (the sociology of paganism and Christianity; the institutional and theological development of the church). However, in the realm of Gibbon's political history, it remains true that "crimes, follies and misfortunes" dominate the scene for long periods of time.

One of the reasons that Gibbon remains such a good read today is the pace of his story as he narrates the careers of those who ascended to the emperor's purple robe from what were sometimes very humble origins as common soldiers, peasants, and slaves, or even, as in the case of Justinian's wife, the Empress Theodora, from the nude cabaret and brothels of Constantinople. But equality of opportunity was matched by equality of outcome. Rome was plagued for most of its existence by the problem of succession, which was normally accomplished by a civil or military rebellion combined with the assassination of the incumbent. "Such was the unhappy condition of the Roman emperors, that whatever might be their conduct, their fate was commonly the same. A life of pleasure or virtue, of severity or mildness, of indolence or glory, alike led to an untimely grave; and almost every reign is closed by the same disgusting repetition of treason and murder."

The subjects of these princes sometimes remained immune to the violence of succession but at other times were bound up with it. In just three battles in the civil war of 323 A.D. between Constantine and Licinius, sixty thousand Romans were left dead in the field. When emperors fell, Gibbon notes, they could take whole provinces with them. After the failed revolt in about 265 A.D. of Ingenuus, whose troops in the province of Illyricum (the Balkans) had elevated him to usurp the purple, his rival Gallienus sent a message to one of his ministers. "It is not enough," says that soft but inhuman prince,

> that you exterminate such as have appeared in arms: the chance of battle might have served me as effectually. The male sex of every age must be extirpated; provided that, in the execution of the children and the old men, you can contrive means to save our reputation. Let every one die who has dropt an expression, who has entertained a thought against me, against *me*, the son of Valerian, the father and brother of so many princes. Remember that Ingenuus was made emperor: tear, kill, hew in pieces. I write to you with my own hand, and would inspire you with my own feelings.

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Gibbon's analysis is sophisticated enough to recognize that a large-scale political system such as the Roman Empire can itself display relative stability while at the same time suffering continuous turbulence at the level of the palace. In the history of great monarchies, he says, the attention of both the writer and reader of history is naturally drawn to the court, the capital, and the army, while the millions of obedient subjects pursue their lives in obscurity. In less established systems, such as the early republics of Athens or Sparta, the impact of ordinary individuals is much greater and thus attracts more historical attention, even when this is sometimes unwarranted.

In other words, in opposition to the French search for general laws of historical causation, Gibbon argues that explanations need to be appropriate to their subject. In some historical circumstances, such as newly formed or emerging polities, the role of individuals such as founding fathers may be profound; in other circumstances, a system may be so well entrenched that it might survive the worst kind of abuse from apparently powerful political figures. Similarly, once major internal systemic problems have emerged, neither the fortunes nor adversities of politics may be able to stem the tide. Under Justinian, the general Belisarius recaptured Italy from the Goths and Africa from the Vandals. But the economic decline of Rome, coupled with high taxes and the complete loss of martial spirit among the citizens, meant that new armies could not be raised and so the territorial gains could not be held. Gibbon deploys a counterfactual (a device that some recent authors imagine has only just been invented) to argue that, under the reign of Justinian's Byzantine court, Rome had reached the state of economic and political weakness where, even if "all the Barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire of the West."

Gibbon also argues for the impact upon history of the role of chance, of the perfidy of distant decisions, and of the influence of unintended consequences. The outcomes of the wars between the various German tribes who contested the territories on the periphery of the empire, Gibbon demonstrates, depended as much on luck and ignorance of the enemy's position as it did on strength of arms and valor. The eventual survival of the Franks in Gaul was due to such accidents and fortune, while the complete extermination of the Gepidae nation was the result of an alliance formed between the Lombard and the Avar kings that was directed more at Rome than at the hapless victim.

Volume Three of the Penguin edition traces the empire from 640 to 1500 when its history is dominated by the emergence of Islam, first by the Arab conquest of the Middle East and Africa, second by the Crusades which were organized in response, and third by the final capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans. The growth of Islam, Gibbon contends, was a matter of chance. Deploying another counterfactual, he argues that had Justinian's Abyssinian allies not lost an obscure military conflict in Yemen in the sixth century, Arabia would have been preserved for Christianity and the Islamic uprising that began in Mecca would never have happened. "Mahomet must have been crushed in his cradle, and Abyssinia would have prevented a revolution which has changed the civil and religious state of the world."

Although Penguin's editor, David Womersley, says Gibbon's satires of religion derive from Voltaire, it may be argued that he is just as distant from this Frenchman as he is from Montesquieu. The complete edition provides the opportunity to examine his every word about Christianity, not just the salacious bits. I read the whole three volumes looking for an admission or even a hint somewhere that he was an atheist or at least a skeptic, as I had long thought, but could find none. In fact, the work is an affirmation of the author's Christian faith. He talks unambiguously about Jesus as "the Son of God" and of "the pure and proper divinity of Christ." He says that the first

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cause for the success of the Christian religion was due to "the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself and to the ruling providence of its great Author," and that his own analysis of the sociology of the early believers should be seen as an account of "the secondary causes." Counterbalancing his denunciation of bishops like Theophilus of Alexandria is the fact that some of his most elegant prose and highest praise is reserved for other figures of the church, especially Pope Gregory the Great, who converted Brittania, and Boethius, the Roman Senator and Christian philosopher martyred by the Goths. He also expresses a debt of gratitude to those monastic monks who preserved the monuments of Greek and Roman literature through the Dark Ages of barbarian rule.

All of Gibbon's mockery of the miracles claimed for hermit monks, of the celibacy of the clergy, of the worship of images and relics, and of the temporal lust for wealth and power displayed by so many princes of the church, can be explained by his Protestantism. Writing for an English audience, he is making the same kinds of criticism of Roman Catholicism that Protestants had urged since Luther. To a Protestant audience, all his ridicule is directed at safe targets—the indulgence, myths, and deviations of Popery—and does not call into question the basis of the religion itself. At one point, he even comments that an epistle he cites will be "painful to the Catholic divines; while it is dear and familiar to our Protestant polemics." Moreover, his identification of Christianity as one of the causes of the fall of Rome is far from unequivocal. He certainly ascribes some responsibility to the otherworldliness adopted by "the useless multitudes of both sexes" who locked themselves away from society, but in the same passage he goes on to record how Christianity was a "principle of union as well as of dissension" and that the sermons from the pulpits of the empire "inculcated the duty of passive obedience to a lawful and orthodox sovereign."

Gibbon's own justification for recording so many of the flaws of the faith is that he is not writing theology, which is "the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity," but history, which discovers "the inevitable mixture of error and corruption, which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings." The Christianity for which he acknowledges most sympathy is the simple faith of the gospels, the creed that prevailed before theologians and bishops emerged to generate heresies, inquisitions, schisms, and innumerable sentences of death over fine lines of doctrine which few of the priesthood, let alone their parishioners, fully understood. He quotes with approval the sentiments of Procopius, the chronicler of the political, military, and religious accomplishments of the age of Justinian:

> *that* religious controversy is the offspring of arrogance and folly; *that* true piety is most laudably expressed by silence and submission; *that* man, ignorant of his own nature, should not presume to scrutinise the nature of God; and *that* it is sufficient for us to know, that power and benevolence are the perfect attributes of the Deity.

Though it initially attracted some critics, Gibbon's work was generally highly praised when it was published. It turned him into a London literary celebrity, and he was one of the most popular authors of his day. In 1776, he said his first volume was "on every table and on almost every toilet." This means his writing was both an expression and a reflection of enlightened opinion in late eighteenth-century England. If this is so, then this opinion cannot be equated with that of France at the same time. Besides those already discussed, there are other areas in *The Decline and Fall* that, if examined in detail, could make the same point. For instance, while the philosophes saw their king as the barrier to freedom, Gibbon argued that a hereditary monarchy was a precondition for a civilized political system since it solved the problem

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of arbitrary succession that had caused so much and such predictable bloodshed in Rome.

His attitude to the savages and barbarians of Siberia and Africa was also the opposite of his French contemporaries'. In a long passage, he dissects and demolishes Montesquieu's concept of the "noble savage," the idea that the natural man is virtuous and that it is civilization that makes him corrupt. For Gibbon, this Romantic idea is the opposite of the truth, as he demonstrates through several extensive examinations of the bleak and lawless pastoral societies of the Goths, Vandals, Huns, Tartars, Mongols, and other nomads of the plains of Siberia and the Ukraine who periodically fought their way across the Danube to wreak havoc on the cultivated lands of the Mediterranean.

In short, the intellectual product and legacy of the English Enlightenment is quite different from that of the French. In Gibbon, the spirit of inquiry and the fruits of research confirm the value of the existing institutions of English society, including its religion. In France, these tools were deployed in opposition to the same institutions. In England, Gibbon emphasized the responsibility of individuals and celebrated the virtue and courage of statesmen and churchmen, where they existed, even though he recorded that the natural passions of humanity were likely to leave such qualities in short supply. In France, the philosophes sought to find general laws of society that would render the actions of individuals irrelevant. The intellectual heritage of the English Enlightenment, as exemplified in Gibbon, clearly goes some of the way to explaining the different political histories of the two countries in the ensuing two centuries. England has enjoyed a stable and peaceful national history marked by a gradual extension of its democracy; France has been periodically racked by revolution, internal collapse, and foreign invasion.

Let me finish with some overdue praise for those responsible for the three-volume Penguin Classics edition now available. The publishers have done a fine job with very readable, sturdy paperbacks that open nicely and do not fall apart. The price is a bargain. Despite the disagreement with David Womersley I have recorded above, it should be said that his Introduction is the best essay I have yet seen on *The Decline and Fall* and, indeed, the best Introduction to any of the Penguin Classics I have read. Each volume contains the text of the first edition but also includes a list of the corrections the author made in subsequent reprints. Typos are rare: I noted only six in total, all in Volume Two. Volume Three contains three invaluable appendices: Gibbon's Vindication, or reply to his critics, that was originally published separately; a bibliographical index that refers to every source cited in the footnotes; and a witty, general index of the original six volumes that was published in 1788 but never reprinted since. My only complaint is that there is no map of the ancient world.

Toward the end of his Introduction, David Womersley advises: "You are on the threshold of one of the greatest narratives of European literature." Who could disagree? In its own way, *The Decline and Fall* is as powerful a work of art as *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, or Handel's *Messiah*. Unlike these three, unfortunately, you cannot pop out one evening to the theater to take it in. It needs a whole summer holiday or a long winter by the fire, a time scale few of us today are likely to commit more than once or twice in a lifetime. Still, like any great work of art, once you have experienced it, you wonder how you could have lived without it.

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The seriousness of Yvor Winters

by David Yezzi

Though night is always close, complete negation
Ready to drop on wisdom and emotion,
Night from the air or the carnivorous breath,
Still it is right to know the force of death,
And, as you do, persistent, tough in will,
Raise from the excellent the better still.
—Thom Gunn, "To Yvor Winters, 1955"

With a few weighty exceptions, the bulk of poetry's greatest critics in America in this century have also been its practitioners. Such poet-critics, many subjoined with varying degrees of accuracy to the New Criticism, brought to their writings on verse an artisan's supple hand as well as the fruits of a rigorous apprenticeship in the craft of making poems: the essays of each, like windows at Chartres, display their sponsors' guild affiliation some way in the corner. As critics, all hove close to the nuances of poetic facture; as poets, to a scholar's exhaustive knowledge of the progress of poetry in English.

Take as a measure of the relative wealth of first-rate poetry and poetry criticism in the Thirties and Forties the initial volume of John Crowe Ransom's *Kenyon Review* (1939), which featured work from Randall Jarrell, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Yvor Winters, Muriel Rukeyser, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell (who, like Jarrell and Berryman, was still in his twenties). That the ranks of poet-critics today have been attenuated seems inevitable given the breadth of that antecedent outpouring; to be sure, the standard has been borne into the Nineties, in America and elsewhere—not least of all by Seamus Heaney, Donald Hall, and Joseph Brodsky—but the diminution is palpable all the same.

If this falling off constitutes an injury to poetry, the added insult is the unavailability of much of the writing from that fecund earlier period. As a corrective, *The Advocates of Poetry*,[1] a collection of essays by American poet-critics after T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, has been recently edited by R. S. Gwynn, himself an essayist and poet. In addition to pieces by several poet-critics already mentioned, returned to the spotlight are works by Robert Penn Warren, Louise Bogan, Robert Hayden, Kenneth Burke, Elder Olson, Delmore Schwartz, and John Ciardi. As Gwynn points out in his Introduction, a situation no longer exists where the dual role of the poet-critic is seen as a responsibility, where, in Lowell's words, critics such as "Allan Tate, Eliot, Blackmur, and Winters . . . were very much news. You waited for their essays, and when a good critical essay came out it had the excitement of a new imaginative work."

Of these, Yvor Winters, perhaps, has fallen furthest. This is a great shame, for it is just Winters's brand of seriousness and his emphasis on logic and reason in poetry that

1 *The Advocates of Poetry: A Reader of American Poet-Critics of the Modernist Era*, edited by R. S. Gwynn; University of Arkansas Press, 242 pages, $36.

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contemporary verse sorely wants. The current neglect may have as much to do with the notorious critic's crabbed, sometimes contradictory and dogmatic style. Winters's stern call for a "moral poetry" was provocative, while his more cracked judgments earned him the opprobrium of many who, like Stanley Edgar Hyman in *The Armed Vision* (1947), saw Winters as "an excessively irritating and bad critic of some importance." Randall Jarrell was likewise divided in his estimation of Winters. From one side of his mouth he pronounced in *The New York Times* that "Winters' clear, independent and serious talent has produced criticism that no cultivated person can afford to leave unread." And from the other, in an unpublished lecture lately exhumed for an issue of *The Georgia Review*, Jarrell suggests that Winters's criticism

> should be classified, in his own terms, as a startlingly neoprimitive variety of neoclassicism, since in it he pretends to a simplicity, a simple-mindedness, that is not naturally his but that has been imported from another age at the great cost of everyone concerned. Mr. Winters' critical method reminds me of Blake and his wife sitting naked in their garden, pretending to be Adam and Eve.

Of Winters's "The Experimental School in American Poetry," which Jarrell notes has "been praised as the critical feat of the time," he gripes, "There is a sort of brutal frivolity about it: it is so disorganized, arbitrary, and obviously inadequate as to be unworthy both of the subject and Mr. Winters."

Hyman, too, picks up on this brutal strain in Winters, whose method he locates in the broad scythe-strokes of the evaluator. Lesser poets (who, for Winters, often had the greatest reputations) were mown down in order that others more in line with Winters's view of poetry might flourish. When weighing the value of a particular poet, Winters proceeded with the imperiousness of, as Denis Donoghue has euphemistically put it, "a mind assertively made up." As Hyman notes, Winters's poetic taxonomies could be perfunctory in the extreme: "He gives only his conclusions, almost never with any evidence approaching adequacy, and in a form in which it is not possible to argue with him or even understand what he is trying to say." What's more, the evaluative critic "can be saved from falling into either priggishness or pontifical foolishness only by being invariably right. There should be no need to point out that Winters is hardly that."

The litany of Winters's more eccentric *obiter dicta* has been well rehearsed by Hyman and others: he felt, for example, that Charles Churchill, "the greatest poetic talent" of the mid-eighteenth century, was wrongfully passed over for Collins and Gray; F. G. Tuckerman and Jones Very were, along with Dickinson, two of the three "greatest poets of the nineteenth century" (take *that* Keats, Wordsworth, et al.); Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* is superior to any one novel by Austen, Melville, or Henry James; Robert Bridges is a better poet than Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, or Marianne Moore; while the poetry of T. Sturge Moore, a correspondent and friend of Yeats, outstrips that of his prominent pen pal.

If Winters exalted some unexpected candidates to his personal pantheon, he regularly barred those generally thought to be of the first water. While by no means exhausting the list, René Wellek has compiled a roster of Winters's broadest condemnations. A snippet from just those dealing with the nineteenth century argues that "Coleridge . . . is 'merely one of the indistinguishably bad poets of an unfortunate period,'"; "Tennyson 'has nothing to say, and his style is insipid'; Browning is 'fresh, brisk, shallow, and journalistic'; Arnold 'sentimental to the point of being lachrymose.'" Here one perceives the glint of genuine insight flashing from those bared teeth, though the uniformity of Winters's denouncement of the nineteenth century is unlikely to find many wholeheartedly sympathetic readers.

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The poet Robert Pinsky, who studied with Winters at Stanford University, recounts the ridicule the "Old Man" faced even from some of his own students. In the twentieth section of Pinsky's poem "Essay on Psychiatrists," a defiant, self-aware Winters is ventriloquized through the voice of the professor:

> . . . "*I know why you are here.*
>
> *You are here to laugh. You have heard of a crazy*
> *Old man who believes that Robert Bridges*
> *Was a great poet; who believes that Fulke*
>
> *Greville was a great poet, greater than Philip*
> *Sydney; who believes that Shakespeare's* Sonnets
> *Are not all that they are cracked up to be. . . .*"

Winters was loyal to his favorite students, however, often crediting them with knitting together the strands of a logical, plain-spoken poetic, which had been frayed so violently by the associative tendencies of the Romantic tradition. Winters makes room at the top of his critical ladder for students and colleagues such as Thom Gunn, J. V. Cunningham, Edgar Bowers, N. Scott Momaday, Donald Stanford, and his wife, Janet Lewis—a few of them excellent poets, but a dubious, nepotistic list. In turn his students have lauded their mentor in book-length studies and essays, as well as in memoirs by Gunn, Donald Hall, and Turner Cassity. As a tribute, Pinsky dedicated his critical work *The Situation of Poetry* to Winters.

Never wanting for detractors, Winters's reputation has to a large extent had to rely for its perpetuation on a claque of devoted disciples, increasingly so as the whole generation of critics succumbed to an ebbing of interest in their brand of criticism. Nevertheless, as both a description of its enduring ills and a prescription for regaining much that has been lost to the lyric tradition in English, Winters's bitter pill is our long-overlooked and strongest medicine.

Born on October 17, in Chicago, (Arthur) Yvor Winters (1900–1968) grew up in Eagle Rock, California, with his parents and maternal grandmother, who taught him to read, at the age of four, out of the works of Macaulay. In 1917 he became a founding member of the University of Chicago Poetry Club, though his undergraduate studies were interrupted in the fall of 1918 by the onset of tuberculosis. A fair-weather cure brought him eventually to St. Vincent's Sanatorium (and later to Sunmount Sanatorium) in Sante Fe, where, despite the distance, Winters maintained contact with his Chicago circle, including Janet Lewis, his future wife. Lewis, herself a poet of considerable accomplishment, had joined the Poetry Club in 1919. When she, too, was diagnosed with tuberculosis, Winters arranged for her to tutor at Sunmount in exchange for her residence there in 1922. He took a B.A. and an M.A. in Romance languages and Latin from the University of Colorado—the place again dictated by his health. In 1935 Winters received his Ph.D. from Stanford, where he would remain as a teacher until 1966. His seven major critical works were from these years: *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry* (1937); *Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* (1938); *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943)—these first three gathered in 1947 as *In Defense of Reason*; *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1946); *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (1957); *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English* (1967); and the posthumous *Uncollected Essays and Reviews* (1976).

Winters began, however, as a poet. During his years in sanatoriums, he wrote the majority of the poems that would compose his first two collections, *The Immobile Wind* (1921) and *The Magpie's Shadow* (1922). In these books, Winters followed the Imagist tradition of Pound and had, by the time of his first book, "definitely given up rhymed verse except for short excursions."[2] For the

2 For this and for further biographical material, see the exhibition catalogue *The Strength of Art: Poets and Poetry in the Lives of Yvor Winters and Janet*

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young poet, free verse was "more interesting and more challenging. I truly believe that it can be used for practically anything for which one can use rhymed." It was at this time that he characterized poetry as escapism: "a permanent gateway to walking oblivion." As the poet and critic Dick Davis has pointed out, though, Winters quickly repented such youthful vagaries and turned "from oblivion to definition," adding that his work had "also taken on a moral dimension": "the verse he admired and wrote in his early twenties was arational, minimal, and concrete; his later work is rational, discursive, and to a large degree abstract."

This extreme about-face was not only galvanizing, it was permanent; Winters would remain on this tack through his last published works of poetry and criticism. The shift toward the rational, while worked out over some years, was relatively abrupt, given how thoroughly it pervaded every aspect of his thought and practice. If Winters's newly won opinions put readers on their guard in the Thirties, they would fairly provoke riots in classrooms today. When asked by Stanford professors at his orals if he was an absolutist, Winters replied, "Yes, I am, relatively speaking," which was to say that compared to his adjudicators he certainly was. In the Introduction to *Primitivism and Decadence*, he mapped his territory as an anti-Romantic and a combatant of relativism:

> The Romantic theory of human nature teaches that if man will rely upon his impulses, he will achieve the good life. When this notion is combined, as it frequently is, with a pantheistic philosophy or religion, it commonly teaches that through surrender to impulse man will not only achieve the good life but will achieve a kind of mystical union with the Divinity: this for example is the doctrine of Emerson. Literature thus becomes a form of self-expression. . . .
>
> The theory of literature I defend . . . is absolutist. I believe that the work of literature, in so far as it is valuable, approximates a real apprehension and communication of a particular kind of objective truth.

Emerson was Winters's long-standing *bête noire*, a propounder of such untenable notions as "no man, no matter how ignorant of books, need be perplexed in his speculations." Winters characterized Emerson's view of art as resting "on the assumption that man should express what he is at any given moment." The dangers to poetry from self-expression of this kind are both technical and thematic: the poet is caught between the rocks of a first-thought-best-thought brand of automatism, where every word is judged worthy that reflects a "spontaneous impression," and the whirlpool of ideas linked only by loose association, where "extemporary performances" overbear the desire to deepen one's understanding through carefully reasoned contemplation.

Emerson receives such exhaustive attention from Winters in part because he is American, and thereby a localizer of Romanticism, but Emerson is not the watershed of such views, merely a tributary onto native soil. Winters traces the antirational tradition—the genesis of which he places in the early 1700s—to two basic doctrines:

> the sentimentalism of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (later summarized by Pope, along with other ideas, in the *Essay on Man*), and the doctrine of the association of ideas, a psychological doctrine having its beginnings in Hobbes and formulated by Locke, a doctrine translated into literary theory by Addison and discussed interminably in the eighteenth century.

To say nothing of the nineteenth, where, for Winters, such ideas undermined an entire school of poets who had turned away from the study of experience through reason. The rise of the subjective view of art in the eighteenth century was radicalized in the nineteenth as Romanticism, of which Em-

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Lewis, prepared by Brigitte Hoy Carnochan (Stanford University, 1984).

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erson's is an extreme American version. As far as Winters was concerned, of the Romantic poets the less said the better—unless, of course, one spoke up to denigrate them.

Perhaps haunted by the madness and death of his friend Hart Crane (whom he called "a saint of the wrong religion"), Winters identified the psychic destruction at work on three centuries of poets:

> From the eighteenth century onward, and not, so far as I can recollect, before, we have had a high incidence of madness among poets of more or less recognized talent: Collins, Gray, Chatterton, Smart, Blake, and others later; the same thing happens in other languages. A psychological theory which justifies the freeing of emotions and which holds rational understanding in contempt appears to be sufficient to break the minds of a good many men with sufficient talent to take the theory seriously.

According to Winters, Crane was a genius who "ruined his life and his talent by living and writing" in the shadow of "the two great religious teachers of our nation," Emerson and Whitman. In 1932, the same year Crane ordered a large breakfast before slipping over the side of an ocean liner, Winters published his only short story, "The Brink of Darkness," which has taken on the resonance of a spiritual manifesto. In it he describes a "hostile supernatural world," at once pernicious and unknowable, in which darkness hovers just beyond the illumination of the rational: "It was as if there were darkness evenly underlying the brightness of the air." This darkness he would later relate to such practices as hedonism, obscurantism, associationism, and incontinent emotionalism. In "Notes on Contemporary Criticism" (1929) from *Uncollected Essays*, Winters puts a diamond point on these "insidious" forces:

> The basis of evil is in emotion; Good rests in the power of rational selection in action, as a preliminary to which *the emotion in any situation must be as far as possible eliminated, and, in so far as it cannot be eliminated, understood*. . . . the end is a controlled and harmonious life [italics mine].

It is important to note that what Winters called for was not the complete eradication of emotion (an impossibility) but the elucidation of it. As his chief weapon against corrosive emotionalism, reason became a tenet of faith for Winters. What skulked outside the purview of the rational, the obscuring darkness at the margins of experience, held the supreme threat. His was not, however, a denial of such murky realms; in fact, far from being an innocent with regard to the deleterious darkness outlying reason, Winters keeps the watch on just that verge of benightedness.

Winters's view of poetry, "the art of saying something about something in verse," can be condensed to one often-quoted statement: "The poem is a statement in words about a human experience." Even this simple aphorism, he realizes, draws a distinct line in the sand when "most of the philosophers of this century have been nominalists of one kind or another; they have written extensively to prove that nothing can be said in words, because words are conceptual and do not correspond to reality." Winters points out, however, that if reality or "the realm that our ancestors took to be real" is an illusion, it nonetheless follows certain set laws that we violate at our peril. It is in this realm that "we pass our daily lives, including our moral lives. . . . this illusion is our reality. I will hereafter refer to it as reality."

For Winters, poetry—and, in its concision, lyric, especially—is the highest linguistic expression because, in addition to the denotative aspects of words emphasized in other forms of writing, poetry makes particular use of the connotative ones, the two together composing the "total content" of language. For Winters, the purpose of poetry is to describe experience as precisely as possible. Connotation in poetry, then, acquires a "moral" dimension—to preserve

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clarity, connotation or "feeling" must be carefully controlled :

> The artistic process is one of moral evaluation of human experience, by means of a technique which renders possible an evaluation more precise than any other. The poet tries to understand his experience in rational terms, to state his understanding, and simultaneously to state, by means of the feelings we attach to words, the kind and degree of emotion that should properly be motivated by this understanding.

Though Winters used the term "morality" in various ways, this passage illustrates his reigning principle for how a poem should convey human experience. Here, the term "morality" refers to a fairly technical process of choosing the appropriate words for evaluating a given subject. Romantic poetry often employed associative logic, fuzzy revery, and words emotionally in excess of their subjects. The "moral" Wintersian poet controls emotion, releasing it through restraint. He aims to match the argument of the poem to the proper degree of emotion.

The critic's detractors who feel that Winters, through his adherence to logic, has squelched emotion have lost the gist. The connotations inherent in language are expressive of emotion; to this extent emotion is a great part of the point. The "morality" of poetry as Winters understood it lay in how emotion was not obliterated but managed. Emotion in excess of the motivating argument was contrary to the purpose of poetry, as it obscured the experience under consideration: "In so far as the rational statement is understandable and acceptable, and in so far as the feeling is properly motivated by the rational statement, the poem will be good."

What Winters considers the moral or "ethical" nature of poetry, though, has opened him up to misinterpretation. In *The New Criticism* (1941), John Crowe Ransom bobbles Winters's argument, suggesting that "if there is a poem without visible ethical content, as a merely descriptive poem for example, I believe he thinks it is negligible and off the line of real poetry." Winters fired back in his essay on Ransom from *The Anatomy of Nonsense*—he rarely missed an opportunity to rebut his detractors in print—that, yes, ethical interest is the sole poetic concern, but a descriptive poem in its contemplation of some small nook of human experience perforce contains a moral element that it is the poet's job to evaluate. "Morality" in poetry, as Winters intends it, then, is a slippery beast. The morality of a poem is not confined to any ostensible ethical subject matter, but is found in the degree to which the poem adds to our accurate apprehension of experience.

This point may be clarified by looking at Winters's estimation of the infamously randy John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647–80). For Winters, it is not the lascivious earl's subject matter that determines his poems' moral qualities. Execution is all. Poetic "morality" lies in the propriety of emotion and the logical precision with which the poem is rendered. Even when Rochester writes of his debauchery in "Upon Drinking in a Bowl," there is grace and wit enough for Winters to recommend it as fine poetry—though one might hesitate to recount its rather louche topics. Opposed to this, Winters indicts other poems by Rochester on similar themes which "have a grossness of feeling comparable to his worst actions." The bad poems are not reprehensible for their content, but for their slipshod rendering of experience. Here Winters displays a distinct lack of squeamishness. In a similar vein, he counters Ransom's surprise that Winters should approve of Baudelaire given that his flowers are, after all, "flowers of evil": "The 'logical materials' of much of Baudelaire are no more evil than the materials of Shakespeare. The topics of both men are bad enough, for both explore human experience rather far; both depict evil as evil and make us know it as evil."

In the course of a reading life, one often stumbles on excellent prose writers never before encountered; such discoveries, how-

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ever, are less likely in poetry. First-rate poetry is a more manageable quantity. Unlike with prose, it is possible to read all, or virtually all, of the decent verse in the language. Winters had done just that, and, having developed a basis for evaluation, proceeded in his last book, *Forms of Discovery*, through the entire history of poetry in English. The best section from this book, perhaps Winters's greatest single essay, began as a piece on sixteenth-century verse for *Poetry* and was expanded to chapter length and retitled "Aspects of the Short Poem in the English Renaissance." Save the "post-Symbolist" poetry of Wallace Stevens, which Winters deems the most versatile in the language, the poems of the Renaissance were for Winters unequaled, the peak from which he perceived a long decline.

True to form, Winters's critique of the poetry of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries flouts convention and has the distinction of reclaiming an entire strain of early lyric poetry, namely that of the plain style. C. S. Lewis, in his Oxford *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, rightly identifies the two major movements of the sixteenth century, the "Drab" and the "Golden." Winters recognizes in Lewis's choice of terms, however, the standard prejudice, which favors the "sugared" Petrarchanism of Sidney and Spenser over the native plain style of Barnabe Googe, George Gascoigne, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Ben Jonson. Lewis, he says, "blames modern scholars for approaching the period with Romantic prejudices, but he sees the entire poetry of the period in terms of a Romantic prejudice: he likes the pretty so profoundly that he overlooks the serious."

Winters's seriousness is his abiding characteristic. With regard to Horace's two-fold description of the purpose of poetry, edification and pleasure, Winters's preference seems clear. Take as an example of the plain-style seriousness that Winters championed this sixteenth-century lyric by Googe, "Of Money":

> Give money me, take friendship whoso list,
> For friends are gone come once adversity,
> When money yet remaineth safe in chest,
> That quickly can thee bring from misery.
> Fair face show friends, when riches do abound;
> Come time of proof, fare well they must away.
> Believe me well, they are not to be found
> If God but send thee once a lowering day.
> Gold never starts aside, but in distress,
> Finds ways enough to ease thine heavyness.

While very good, this is not among the greatest poems of the plain style (better would be Jonson's "To His Son" or Gascoigne's "Woodmanship"), yet it is typical in certain appealing respects. Such poems, for Winters, are good because they display themes "broad, simple, and obvious, even tending toward the proverbial, but usually a theme of some importance; a feeling restrained to the minimum required by the subject; a rhetoric restrained to a similar minimum" as opposed to the Petrarchan use of "rhetoric for its own sake." The argument of the poem is painstakingly logical and precise. The rhythm is restrained in its careful adherence to the metrical norm, a heavily stopped line, and a strong caesura.

Googe's tone expresses, here, a good degree of worldly melancholy which one suspects Winters valued, though it is for the poems of spiritual melancholy that he reserves his highest praise—Jonson's "To Heaven," George Herbert's "Church Monuments," and Fulke Greville's "Down in the depth of mine iniquity." For Winters, Greville in particular endeavored "with some consistency to employ the Petrarchan refinements, or such of them as he needed, on matter worthy of them." It is telling, I think, of Winters's own sensibility that he quotes the following passage from Greville, who wrote of himself in a life of his close friend Sir Philip Sidney:

> For my own part I found my creeping genius more fixed upon the images of life, than the images of wit, and therefore chose not to write to them on whose foot the black ox had not already trod, as the proverb is, but to

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those that are weather-beaten in the sea of this world, such as having lost sight of their gardens and groves, study to sail on a right course among rocks and quicksands.

The black ox of melancholy that had trod on Winters's critical writing finds in his poems its fullest and most affecting expression, yet his poetry, even more than his criticism, has fallen off the literary radar. In his review of Winters's *Collected Poems* (1960), Robert Lowell calls him "an immortal poet, a poet of great kindness and stamina." Lowell is perspicacious in naming many of Winters's finest efforts: "Time and the Garden," "John Sutter," "To a Military Rifle 1942," "A Dream Vision," "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," "Hercules," and to my mind his best, "The Marriage." Denis Donoghue assents to this list and offers several more: "Inscription for a Graveyard," "A Prayer for My Son," "A Fragment," and "A Testament."

To these fine poems one might add others such as "A Grave," included in *Collected Poems*. The poem begins, as does Herbert's "Church Monuments," with the contemplation of a grave, where the deceased waits alone "Under a little plaque": "There is no faintest tremor in that urn./ Each flake of ash is sure in its return" ("How tame these ashes are, how free from lust," Herbert writes). And, as with Herbert, the certainty of death prompts thoughts of mending one's life:

> What has he found there? Life it seems is this:
> To learn to shorten what has moved amiss;
> To temper motion till a mean is hit,
> Though the wild meaning would
> unbalance it;
> To stand, precarious, near the utter end;
> Betrayed, deserted, and alone descend,
> Blackness before, and on the road above
> The crowded terror that is human love;
> To still the spirit till the flesh may lock
> Its final cession in eternal rock.

Anyone skeptical as to Winters's access to emotional power need only reread the passage beginning "Betrayed. . . ." He continues:

> Then let me pause in this symbolic air,
> Each fiery grain immobile as despair,
> Fixed at a rigid distance from the earth,
> Absorbed each motion that arose from birth.
> Here let me contemplate eternal peace,
> Eternal station, which annuls release.
> Here may I read its meaning, through the eye
> Sear with effort, ere the body die.
> For what one is, one sees not; 'tis the lot
> Of him at peace to contemplate it not.

The poem hinges on movement. The "motion" of life in the earlier stanza suggested by the words *moved*, *motion*, *unbalance*, *precarious*, and *To still*, is countered with the stasis of death in *pause*, *immobile*, *fixed*, *rigid*. The contemplation of death affects a death-like stillness in the speaker, from which vantage point he may look on life. The final couplet relates a bitter paradox: when one is in the throes of life, one cannot see life; when one is dead, the "wild meaning" is no longer a concern.

Winters's poems never hesitate to swing for the outfield wall. They do everything poems these days ought not to do: they tackle subjects other than the self, grapple with universals, follow strict prosodic norms, command a bold rhetorical tone, eschew imagery for abstraction, favor edification over pleasure. They are, in Winters's phrase, "Laurel, archaic, rude." If Winters's poems are forgotten, they have themselves to blame. They are extreme measures for poetry's present ills. Likewise, while its often unorthodox judgments can be hard to swallow whole, Winter's criticism reclaims for poetry a passionate control, and a spareness suited to our perennial concerns. After Winters, every line and every word may be held responsible to standards of emotional clarity. As with Rilke's archaic torso, or Winters's own "A Grave," when each of today's more fashionable, self-expressive, and wildly emotive poets looks on Winters's work, there is but one heartfelt message: you must change your life.

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Poems *by Georgia Shreve, Luke Zilles & Brian Henry*

Walking with my son

At first he took my hand,
But soon he was drawn away
By an irresistable puddle or log.
I called his attention
To the arcade of multi-colored leaves—
The translucent fresco—
Under which we walked,
And told him this spectacle
Was like a circus,
A performance that would soon be over.
He looked up at me
As if I'd told him
Childhood wouldn't last forever,
Struck with boredom and disbelief,
And showed me something far more thrilling—
A mud-tipped stick shedding its own bark.

I had tried to induce vigilance
For what was passing
In someone who did not yet know time,
Whose footsteps were his
Only form of counting,
For whom a minute was a day,
A week an hour,
And ripening and spoiling
Were all the same.
To him, watches were

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Still just ugly bracelets
Clocks failed pictures,
And calendars books of empty boxes.
The sky darkened, signaling us to hurry,
But he dragged his feet.

Green leaves, red leaves, no leaves—
They were all of equal interest,
As exciting as a stick or puddle,
As much carpet as ceiling,
And fall not so much
A season as a state,
Like dreaming or sleeping,
Part of a curtain going up and down,
Entertaining as the play.
He shook a tree and I stopped him,
Thinking the leaves
Could hang on a bit longer.
He looked at me impatiently,
For he already knew:
The business of leaves is to fall.

—*Georgia Shreve*

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It is snowing

in the Square,
the Palace and Saint Mark's
already faded and still fading
in the white twilight of snowfall—

the pale pillars, the phantom portals
vaguely looming, dimly shadowed,
vanishing into a mist of snow
to drown in sea-drift desolation.

In such a solitude,
unpigeoned and unpeopled,
of fallen and still falling snow,
a lady in black,

lifting a black umbrella,
is striding forward purposefully
toward some appointment
with the winter of her mourning.

Titian is dead.
The light that kindled into color
sinks, extinguished, into night.
What is a mist of rainbow to the sea?

—*Luke Zilles*

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Strictly,

step by step,
the heron enters
the shallows:
erect, adagio,
in rigid concentration:
to stab suddenly and swallow
a flash of glitter.

Imprinting the sand's domain
of stillness and shimmer,
its steps echo
the stamp of peace,
as crisp as frost
perplexed on glass
to window winter.

A wash of watercolor
brushes the paper with not sky,
but the lazuli of heaven,
a haze of reverence
serenely floating
the lifted frankincense
and air of evening.

Time, overwriting
the dead history of ink,
inscribes in stringent salt
the scattered shore
of shell and elegy,
of hull, keel, skull.
Read the nameless sand.

—*Luke Zilles*

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Abandoned ship

Dingle, Ireland

Nevertheless, the boat is on the rocks.
We conjure up all sorts of disasters,
reaching for bloody details of the affair.
A slow forward motion, and then that's it—
this boat leaning on the rocks, rotted through,
its ribs flaked like sponge, the paint chipped, faded.
These rocks have grown used to the weight.
It gives them something to do
besides hug the mud and wait for water.

You say the town should have moved it by now—
rusty nails everywhere luring local kids
into tetanus shots. Maybe it serves
as a warning to would-be drunken sailors,
maybe as a reminder of lives lost,
or livelihoods. Maybe they are waiting
for a concerned neighbor to start something:
hire a truck, sink it, burn it, bury it.
But there is no motion here—the spirit
stagnant, like the water. Like the water.

—Brian Henry

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Letter from London

Backbenchers & youthquakers

by Mordecai Richler

Flicker . . . whirr . . . Move it along, Granddad, you're getting in the way of The Scene! The London Scene, that is! From Soho to Notting Hill, from Camberwell to Camden Town, the capital city of Dear Old Blighty pulses anew with the good vibrations of an epic-scale youthquake!
—*Vanity Fair*, March 1997

I first settled in London in 1950 at a time when the rubble left over from the Blitz was still in evidence here and there. Food and clothing rationing were still intact. Dowdiness was the rule. But the admirable new National Health Service was working to just about everybody's satisfaction, and I never once encountered a beggar on the streets. In 1957, along came the Suez crisis. I attended a protest rally in Trafalgar Square and joined the march on Downing Street. A French Communist had instructed us in how to cope with the police on horseback, the so-called "Whitehall Cossacks." He said, "You throw marbles under the horses' feet. They slip and fall. They break their legs."

An indignant British comrade protested, "But we couldn't do that. It would be cruelty to animals."

So I liked it here. The book pages in the Sunday broadsheets were a joy: Cyril Connolly in *The Sunday Times*, Nigel Dennis in *The Sunday Telegraph*, and Philip Toynbee in *The Observer*. The parliamentary debates were exhilerating. One day, during the Suez crisis, Nye Bevan was savaging poor Selwyn Lloyd, then foreign secretary, when Prime Minister Harold Macmillan ambled into the chamber. Without missing a beat, Bevan said, "Why tease the monkey when here comes the old organ-grinder himself?"

Two years later Supermac told us we had never had it so good. John Profumo was caught lying to the House about his romp with a tart and actually resigned, something unheard of on the new standard. Today, if a minister is caught in a fib, the parliamentary convention is for him to blame his civil servants for misinforming him.

I returned to Montreal with my family in 1972, and then, four years ago, our children grown up, my wife and I began to spend the winters in London. Little did we realize this would be trendy. *Newsweek* has blessed London, dubbing it "the coolest city on the planet," and *Vanity Fair* has confirmed our new status with an insufferably manic twenty-five-page report, "London Swings Again," which explained "how London got its groove back," even its politicians "cool or, well, coolish." Proof was proffered by with-it fashion designer Alexander McQueen, adjudged adorable by David Kamp, the chronicler who filled Mayhew's old office for *Vanity Fair*.

"I'm influenced by anything and everything, really," burbled McQueen. "I saw a tramp with a string tied round his coat. I did the silhouette of his coat, but with a Mongolian-fur collar and cuffs, and a belt where the string was. I wasn't laughing at

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him. Who should be laughing? My coat cost £1,200, his coat cost him nothing."

In the swinging capital city of Dear Old Blighty, the once efficient National Health Service is now on the verge of collapse, hospital corridors lined with unattended beds, people waiting months for operations. After a year of dithering about Mad Cow Disease, it is still illegal to export U.K. beef, and even many people here won't touch it. The Tories and Labor are both bitterly divided on whether or not to join the wogs, across the Channel, in switching to a single European currency. This offshore island race now advertises itself as a source of cheap, strike-free labor. Like Taiwan. A forgiving bunch, Britons are especially eager for investment by the Germans and Japanese. My wife and I live in Chelsea, pronounced more fashionable than ever by *Vanity Fair*, but strolling down the King's Road, which I have come to think of as a toll street, I can go through a pocketful of change within four blocks, attending to the epic-scale youthquakers squatting on the pavement, their makeshift cardboard signs proclaiming them homeless and hungry.

Back in the late Sixties, Peter Cook predicted this island was bound to sink giggling into the sea. His time has come. Equality officers at the Labor-run Islington council have reproached childminders, who operate a shoppers' day nursery, because playthings do not "take on board lesbian and gay issues and issues of disability." And the Church of England is now groovy. Its new TV commercial, set to hip-hop music, shows Christians praying while driving a BMW sports car, dancing in the trendy Ministry of Sound nightclub, and playing basketball, while the voice-over intones: "These people are doing something which has never been done in a TV commercial. They're praying. If you want to find out more about Christianity why not try going to church this Easter?" Elsewhere, a private Devon school of delinquents, which costs the local authorities sixty thousand pounds a year per pupil, is under police investigation. The school's managing director has protested that people have it in for his hall of learning. "We take children rejected by everybody else. We can't be judged on highbrow subjects—Shakespeare, foreign languages, and all that sort of thing. All the inspector wanted to do is look at highbrow lessons we're not very good at. Why do we have to teach Brahms and Beethoven, not the Spice Girls?"

Black "supermodel" Naomi Campbell, who earns more than a million pounds a year, has accused fashion magazines of being prejudiced against her kind. I should have thought full-bodied women, or those without silicone-enhanced breasts, had a better case, but never mind. And an understandably weary male model named Adam Perry, interviewed by the new *GQ Active* magazine, claims to have already bonked three thousand women. "From him, this has meant straight sex, oral sex, anal sex, S&M, group sex, rubber parties and orgies." Happily, the thirty-three-year-old Perry may soon be able to take a well-deserved rest. According to Dr. Mick, who sorts out problems for readers of *Loaded* magazine, help is on the way. Scientists have discovered a chemical called neuro-peptide, which could enable women to enjoy a self-induced orgasm. Men could go on drinking, writes Dr. Mick, and "leave girls to go to it . . . A pill like this for women will take the pressure off us."

Count on a letter writer to the *Times* to query the solution. Mr. Andrew Bradford, of Aboyne, Aberdeenshire, wrote: "The female orgasm pill, even if it were to be combined with paracetamol to prevent headaches, is all very well but it still doesn't mow the lawn."

As I write, in mid-April, we are only two weeks away from the day when Europe's offshore islanders will trek to the polls, where they will be confronted with only the illusion of choice. They can endorse the traditional Tories—exhausted after seventeen years in office, and undermined by sleaze—or copycat New Labor, the untried, born-again Tories, led by Tony Blair, his smarmy smile suppressed until he is assured

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of victory. Borrowing shamelessly from brother Newt Gingrich, Blair has offered the electorate a ten-point covenant. "Trust me," he has said, foolishly raising the doubts about his character that are on just about everybody's mind here.

The U.K. will not be making an ideological choice on May 1, but a management decision. Assuming that Blair's takeover bid boosts him into Number Two, then once his steely Cherie has turned over the mattresses, he can be counted on to sell off whatever family silver is still left in the nation's pantry. Although opposed to privatization while in opposition, he will put air traffic control up for sale, as well as the London underground, Westminster bridge, and the Queen's knickers, if available.

If Labor isn't what it used to be, not everything has changed since the Fifties. Dottiness still prevails on both the loopy Left and backwoods Right. The seventy-five-year-old Reverend John Papworth, of St. John's Wood, London, has lost his pulpit after proclaiming that shoplifting from supermarkets is not a sin but a "way of reallocating economic resources," especially when you consider the damage supermarket chains have done to local tradesmen. On the far Right, a Tory backbencher nobody had ever heard of before, David Evans, has come out, in a taped interview with a school magazine, for the castration of rapists. "Come on," he said, "if it was your daughter or this lovely girl here? Raped by some black bastard outside the school one evening? Let him go out on bail so that he can go and do your sister?" Evans also denounced women MPs, who were usually less talented than their male colleagues, and were promoted irrespective of their merits, "like Virginia Bottomley, who's dead from the neck up, right? She has been in the cabinet simply because she's a woman."

Actually, Evans may have a point about the heritage secretary. Introduced to Julian Barnes at last year's Booker Prize dinner, Ms. Bottomley asked, "What do you do?"

"I'm a writer," said Barnes.

"Who for?" she asked.

Our MP, in the Royal Borough of Chelsea and Kensington, was deselected months ago. The gentleman in question, a well-known tippler, fell flat on his face on the pavement after leaving a booze up at the last Tory convention, embarrassing us. Our new candidate, in this safest of Tory seats, is none other than the former junior defense minister Alan Clark, author of those spicy, highly entertaining *Diaries*, which were deservedly a bestseller here. Clark is an unabashed womanizer. So party poopers who opposed him at the selection meeting, in Chelsea, circulated broadsheets detailing his sexual transgressions. A hard-nosed reporter asked an elderly man if he was scandalized by Clark's philandering. "Frankly," he replied, "I'm envious."

In an election campaign that has begun to play like an Ealing comedy brought up to date, sexual peccadilloes by middle-aged backbenchers continue to undermine the nice John Major's best efforts. In an obvious set-up, a tabloid *Sun* photographer caught Tory MP Piers Merchant smooching in a park with a seventeen-year-old Soho "night-club hostess." Merchant first denied that Ms. Cox had stayed overnight in his London flat, but, confronted by more compromising photographs, he allowed that, yes, that was the case, but she had slept on the sofa. Furthermore, she had interesting ideas about how to revive the Young Conservatives. Later, if only to establish what a devoted husband he was, Merchant posed, French kissing his wife for the benefit of *Sun* photographers. Since then Sir Michael Hirst, an elder of the Church of Scotland, has had to resign as chairman of the Scottish Conservative Party after it was revealed that he had once had a gay relationship with a junior party worker. And now, in this continuing silly season, Piers Merchant's nineteen-year-old niece has been anointed a *Sun* pin-up, posing topless: "RANDY TORY MP'S NIECE A-PIERS ON PAGE THREE!"

According to the pollsters, it's sleaze, not Europe, that is the voters' number one concern. There is the cash-for-questions affair,

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several Tory backbenchers billing their clients a thousand pounds per Westminster query. A former Tory minister has had to resign after admitting he had accepted twenty-five thousand pounds in used fifty-pound notes, delivered in plain brown envelopes, from Mohamed Al Fayed, sole proprietor of Harrods, for favors rendered. But the Tory MP who has really outraged people here is Neil Hamilton. Hamilton, adjudged a sleazebag by *The Economist*, has refused to stand down as a candidate. He doesn't deny that he accepted a couple of champagne-enriched freebie stays at the Paris Ritz, also owned by Al Fayed, or that he lied to Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine about his "errors of judgement," and failed to report ten thousand pounds of payola on his income tax returns, but he insists he never took bundles of cash in plain brown envelopes from Al Fayed.

Given the level of corruption in high political places in Mexico, Japan, France, and Italy, it strikes me that the vigorish that made some Tory hearts beat faster is almost endearing. Very small beer indeed. Look at it this way. Twenty-five thousand pounds in used banknotes would not even get you a cuppa in the White House, never mind an overnighter in the Lincoln bedroom, breakfast brought in on a tray by a beaming Hillary, offering cutlery or chopsticks as required.

One evening last week my wife and I went to a preview of *Tom & Clem*, a new play by Stephen Churchett about Clement Attlee and Tom Driberg at the Potsdam conference in 1945. Driberg, once one of Edith Sitwell's protégés, was the witty, gay *Daily Express* gossip columnist, the original William Hickey, who was elected a Labor MP in 1945.

The wonder was that such talented performers as Michael Gambon (Driberg) and Alec McCowen (Attlee) would lend their gifts to so dreary and predictable a play, its banal dialogue sinking under endless junior-college arguments about the true meaning of socialism, and asinine gags about cheeky homosexuals. A teletype machine figured prominently on the set and I knew there would be no going home until it clacked out the message that the A-bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. It was a long wait. But the play did put me in mind of the immediate postwar years in London. It set me wondering what Michael Foot, that proud old CND warrior and one-time Labor Party leader, now retired in Hampstead, made of Tony Blair's New Labor, which has never once mentioned s——m. Will he, like so many traditional Labor supporters, stay home rather than vote for the mod politics tailored to appeal to London's epic-scale youthquakers?

At a dinner party in London, back in the late Sixties, Michael Foot told me a story about Tom Driberg that has become part of Labor folklore. A week before the 1945 election that would sweep Attlee into office, Driberg was arrested for importuning a toy boy on Brighton Pier. Within the four-block walk to the police station, he had to convince the young bobby that if he went through with the arrest, creating a scandal, there would be no Labor government, and it was the bobby who would be responsible. Rather than be a traitor to his class, the bobby let him go.

Nowadays that would be impossible. The rottweilers who toil for the tabloids, getting wind of the story, wouldn't let go of Driberg's ankles until he had bled to a political death. And, of course, the bobby would be paid fifty thousand pounds, or more, to tell how that "sex rat pervert" had attempted to avoid arrest.

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Theater

Airbrushed imperfections

by Mark Steyn

For all its good intentions, it's hard to apply the theater's lessons to life. Take *Titanic* (the musical), sinking nightly at the Lunt-Fontanne. In striking contrast to Titanic (the ship), *Titanic* (the musical) is a savage indictment of the class system. Hardly a quatrain passes without some passenger or another musing on the vicissitudes of the prevailing social structures, so cruelly replicated in the boat's sleeping arrangements. At the top of the second act, they're formally color coded—monarchical purple for First Class, blue for Second, and, somewhere down among the bottom-feeders, green for Third. Even the token mixed-class couple—she slumming below decks, he having crawled his way up from the hold—are unable to enjoy their socio-economic miscegenation without brooding on its ironies: her father had "a corner on the market"; his had "a market on the corner." Meanwhile, sunk even lower in the bowels of the beast is the boiler room, where burly proletarian types shovel coal as daintily as Edwardian Gaiety Girls twirling their parasols. They used to be miners but things aren't so very different at sea:

> The orders they proopooze aboove
> We execute doon here . . .

I was so moved by the play's egalitarian message that at intermission I rose from my eighth-row center seat in the orchestra (the Lunt-Fontanne's equivalent of the first-class dining room) and beckoned to those dim and distant stick figures way up in the balcony (steerage) to come down and join me. What cheery souls they seemed, grimy urchins and apple-cheeked colleens—or, as they proved on closer inspection, couples from Westchester County unversed in the vagaries of telephone ticket agencies. Still, workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your restricted-view seats! Needless to say, those who've gotten fat on the present system and paid the full seventy-five dollars plus booking fee fell on me and clubbed me to a pulp.

The drama's lessons, then, do not travel, even a couple of yards from the proscenium. As I said, *Titanic* (the musical) is not Titanic (the ship), despite theatrical insiders' gleeful prediction of an identical fate. In fact, in an exquisite example of the peculiar tortures fate devises for Broadway producers, the show's problem (as I write) has been precisely the opposite of the original's: the ship refuses to sink. It would be hard to imagine a more poignant technical malfunction: on the night I went, it stuck again, though my fellow theatergoers gratefully applauded a sudden lurch in the set—a sure indication of the prolonged ovation that would have followed had a mighty tidal wave crashed through the hull, drowned the third-class passengers, and flooded the orchestra pit, but also a reminder that "theatrical" does not necessarily mean the same as "dramatic." *Titanic*

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(the musical) was supposed to be the ultimate Broadway flop, hitting the iceberg of bad reviews and sinking four days out. Instead, the notices were not too bad but not too good either, with the result that *Titanic*'s become a sort of *Marie Celeste* drifting aimlessly on.

In one respect, though, the story of the Titanic is indeed emblematic of Broadway. The ship's owners were determined she should arrive in New York before a certain date in April and urged the crew on to make that deadline at any cost. It's the same on Broadway, where producers are determined to arrive in New York before the end of April, regardless of what kind of shape the show's in by the time it gets there. The last day for Tony Award eligibility is May 1, and in the week-and-a-half before the cut-off date nine new productions came steaming in—from *Titanic* to *The Little Foxes*, from a Bernstein revival to the new Wendy Wasserstein. These shows are not exactly rushed into production: most took longer to build than the Titanic did; *Jekyll and Hyde* (at the Plymouth) has been in the works for a decade; *The Life* (at the Barrymore) goes back even further. Almost all have that strange paradoxical quality, characteristic of the contemporary American stage, of airbrushed imperfection, of being both overimproved and fundamentally defective.

It wasn't always like this. Dion Boucicault, the most successful dramatist of the mid-nineteenth century, in both London and New York, wrote a couple of hundred plays, including sixteen in one year alone. He moved with apparent ease from one form to another—melodrama to comedy of manners to pantomime to political drama; he acted in many of them, too. True, much of his work is undistinguished, but it's no more undistinguished than these elephantine ten-year gestations: *The Vampire* (1852), for example, conveys a keener sense of socio-sexual threat than the new *Jekyll and Hyde*. His treatment of social themes is subtler than many contemporary dramatists': *The Octoroon* (1859) declares itself loudly against slavery and contains the most serious characterization of a Negro then seen on an American stage, yet in its dialogue and atmosphere it is imbued with a deep sense of feeling for the South. That said, Boucicault was never one to resist a splashy effect: by all accounts, the burning riverboat in *The Octoroon*, the underwater rescue in *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), and in *Arrah-Na-Pogue* (1864) the slow sinking of the entire set as the hero climbs an ivy-clad tower to confront the villain and hurl him to his death—all these and many others were more spectacular than anything in *Titanic*. His best plays have proved surprisingly durable: in recent years, *The Shaughraun* has been revived by Britain's National Theatre, *London Assurance* by the RSC, and even a musical version of *The Streets of London* enjoyed some success.

All this is by way of saying that the new *London Assurance*, at the Roundabout, ought to be more fun than it is. Written in 1841, when Boucicault was barely twenty, it was a smash in London. Pitched somewhere between comedy of manners and farce (the plot turns on a father not recognizing his disguised son, etc.), the play presents a contrived yet sharply drawn account of the courtship between a debt-ridden young man and a cynical beauty. Donald Sinden, who played Sir Harcourt Courtly back in the Seventies, considers *London Assurance* the equal of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and you don't have to agree with that to appreciate that the contortions of the plot demand the rich, fruity-voweled, ornate command of the Sinden school. By comparison, Brian Bedford's Sir Narcourt struck me as flat and underpowered. Helen Carey gets closer to the size of performance required, though that may be because a modern audience is instantly well-disposed to her character, Lady Gay Spanker, a name which has got funnier over the years. Otherwise, the best of the bunch is an icy John Horton as the butler, Cool, another name which time has rendered more amusing. Unfortunately, most of what surrounds him in Joe Dowling's uninspired

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staging seems more like a third or fourth read through: you've a sense of what the play could be, but it's still mostly plot mechanics, a skeleton that hasn't been fleshed out.

At the other end of the spectrum, *An American Daughter* (at the Cort) is bang up-to-the-minute: the unseen president can't decide whether to get a cat or a dog and, therefore, is polling the American people on their preferred domestic companion; you can make your voice heard by calling the White House at 1-800-VOTE-DOG or 1-800-VOTE-CAT, as, eventually, one character does. There are mentions of Arianna Huffington and Amy Fisher—no more than that really, because, after all, you only have to mention them to get a laugh. One character has written a standard liberal text *Towards a Lesser Elite*, another the post-feminist bestseller *The Prisoner of Gender*; on the news a White House correspondent reports that the president's nomination for surgeon general appeals to both "pro-choice soccer moms and more conservative fast-food dads."

Wendy Wasserstein has a good ear for the inane locutions of the age, but that last jest is hard to swallow from a dramatist whose own characters are even more absurd amalgams of hot-button issues and hip demographics. The Wasserstein approach to the *dramatis personae* is most concisely summed up in the scene where the male pro-life conservative gay pundit offers to donate his sperm to the female childless African-American Jewish breast-cancer doctor. That's not to say that these characters could never have corporeal form—or at least electronic form: the play's TV anchorman, Timber Tucker, would seem to be not a million miles from the ABC anchorman (and Wasserstein's friend) Forrest Sawyer. But just because a man reads a TelePrompTer on "Nightline" doesn't make him, in dramatic terms, credible. The entire cast—the senior Indiana senator, the celebrated liberal academic, the boy spin doctor, the neo-feminist commentator-cum-purpose-gal—seems to exist in no conceivable reality other than as a particularly ripe late-night discussion panel.

The author says she was moved to write the play by "what happened to" Zoë Baird, Kimba Wood, and Lani Guinier. Leaving aside the question of whether any of those three merited the positions they were up for, or whether they're not a disturbing trend but three quite separate cases, you're struck by how, intentionally or otherwise, Miss Wasserstein's artistic modifications to the Zoë Baird template seem to have transformed it into another story altogether. The American daughter of the title is Lyssa Dent Hughes, pro-choice Democrat health advocate, daughter of a Republican senator and great-granddaughter of Ulysses S. Grant. She seems a shoo-in for confirmation as surgeon general until, during a televised getting-to-know-you brunch from her Georgetown home, someone lets slip that not only does Lyssa always manage artfully to excuse herself from jury duty but on one occasion she never even bothered replying to the summons.

Wow. Next thing you know, the dream nomination has become "the Lyssa Dent Hughes problem" and the president is no longer taking her calls. She is a "good woman," but she has done something wrong and suddenly her life of exemplary public service counts for naught. Miss Wasserstein's choice of trivial indiscretion is interesting. In the real-life cases which so exercised her, it would be possible to argue that one overlooked the immigration status of the children's beloved baby sitter on humanitarian grounds, that one didn't pay social security on the nanny because such a requirement is absurd and unduly onerous in a democracy. But ignoring a jury summons has no such human element or great principle: as an image of the elite's disdain for the responsibilities of citizenship it could hardly be bettered; to paraphrase Leona Helmsley, civic duty is for the little people.

I happened to see *An American Daughter* a couple of days after the Volunteerism Summit in Philadelphia, in which, in one of the

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most nauseating spectacles even by the standards of modern American photo-opportunities, Colin Powell, Al Gore, John Travolta, Oprah Winfrey, and various presidents took time off from their busy schedules of book tours, movie promotions, and campaign finance laundering to call on the rest of us to volunteer for things. Millions of Americans volunteer their time and energy every week—in the Ladies' Aid Society and 4-H Clubs and a thousand other organizations well off the radar screens of the Gores and Travoltas. Actually, among the chief pleasures of the Ladies' Aid Society is that it's one of the few areas of American life untainted by the grisly conjunction of politics and celebrity. But something of the same Gore-like smugness hangs over *An American Daughter*: for all the familiar protests that this "witch hunt" is obscuring discussion of the real health issues facing the nation, Miss Wasserstein's characters seem incapable of discussing serious matters except in the usual posturing slogans—"women's reproductive rights," "gun control is a health issue" . . . They're a cracking cast—especially Hal Holbrook as the senator, Peter Riegert as the liberal, Bruce Norris as the gay, and Elizabeth Marvel as the post-feminist babe—but it's impossible to get any real conflict going because they're all on the same side: when the author attempts to engineer a kiss between Lyssa's husband and the babe, that's what it feels like, engineered. As for Lyssa, the director, Daniel Sullivan, lets Kate Nelligan get away with an irritatingly passive performance: I think she was aiming for the quiet strength of Shaw's Joan, but instead what comes across is arrogant complacency—the assumption that the rightness of her case is self-evident and does not, therefore, have to be argued. Kimba Wood and Lani Guinier would not see themselves in Nelligan.

The last time I saw Wendy Wasserstein, she told me she'd met Colin Powell at the opening of *Carousel* and had been very impressed by him, even though he's a Republican. Well, why wouldn't she be? According to a recent profile in *The New Yorker*, in a typical week

> she might agree to be a co-host, along with Stephen Sondheim, of a party to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of Young Playwrights, Inc. She might agree to participate in a benefit reading at Lincoln Center Theatre . . . At some point, she may have to go to a meeting at the offices of New York's flagship public-television station, where she is on the board, or to a meeting about the Kennedy Center Honors, since she is on its selection committee. Part of the reason she does as she does is that, as she says, "I'm a good girl." But she's also a writer, and her eyes and ears are open. "Maybe other people go to these things because you never know who you might meet. I say, you never know who you might see."

Oh, I think you do: you'll see General Powell and Steve Sondheim and Forrest, and you're unlikely to get a play out of that. If *The Sisters Rosensweig* was a step backwards from *The Heidi Chronicles*, *An American Daughter* is a further dwindling down: I'd hazard that, as Miss Wasserstein was writing this play, it began turning into something else. She didn't know where to take it, so she fell back on wisecracks; thus, in her first explicitly political play, she's wound up drowning in the shallows.

That's a familiar feeling for the big musicals. Seventy years ago, with the old musical comedies about chorines and bootleggers at Long Island house parties, we marveled at how such tender, witty, inventive songs were beached in such atrocious books. Today, in the new super-solemn "music-dramas," the books are still atrocious but, in a concession to formal consistency, now the songs are, too. Most drama can be divided into "cool" shows (detached, cerebral dissection of particular issues) and "hot" shows (emotional identification with characters in crisis). *Titanic*'s problem is that it's cool when it should be hot: no matter how librettist Peter Stone frets about what one steward calls "the privileges of the rich," the

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symbolism is meaningless if it's not rooted in strong, vivid characters. Alas, his collaborator, Maury Yeston, is a chronically cool composer who to date has given Broadway the bloodless score for *Nine* and a couple of sub-Sondheim interpretations for *Grand Hotel*. Here, he reserves his energy for big, extended, a capella chorales which, in dramatic terms, do nothing but distance you further from the characters and merge them all into one indistinct blur. It says everything that the most effective love song is the wireless operator's hymn to his equipment. The director, Richard Jones, is a British opera man who likes to stage everything on steep rakes. For once, it's justified, though, except for a drinks trolley rolling off unaided, Jones never makes much of it. For the rest of the time, Stewart Laing's spare, clinical sets, augmented by LED displays relaying key information (presumably Jones was missing Covent Garden's surtitles), are efficient but never conjure the lavishness of the ship. Dion Boucicault would have understood that at some point in a drama about the Titanic the audience wants to see water and/or sinking. This show is so cool, who needs the iceberg?

A few years back, the lyricist Leslie Bricusse mentioned to me that James Nederlander had asked him to musicalize *The Scarlet Pimpernel* but that, because of the success of *Les Miserables*, they'd now decided that the Pimpernel couldn't just save aristocrats but would have to rescue all those in distress, regardless of race, creed, color, or sexual orientation. I'm not sure what happened to that project, but a similar principle seems to have been applied to Bricusse's adaptation of *Jekyll and Hyde*. In this version of Stevenson's novella, instead of randomly terrorizing the citizenry, Hyde merely kills the hospital governors who've blocked Jekyll's research—the sort of tastefully targeted serial killing, in the name of medical science, that could make him a candidate to succeed Lyssa Dent Hughs as nominee for surgeon general. The composer Frank Wildhorn has written ballads for Whitney Houston and he likes his show tunes the same way, starting soft, with a little chromatic Lite-FM doodling in the left hand, and building to a big, bellowing finale. Everything is declarative: the songs don't reveal feeling, only yell about it.

And the worst of the lot? *Candide*—Bernstein's glorious comic operetta, and perhaps the most prestigious Broadway flop since *Porgy and Bess*. For me, the show is summed up by that woman who gets one buttock shot off: the whole thing is half-assed. But in the Seventies Harold Prince dusted it off, threw out Lillian Hellmann's inert book and got Hugh Wheeler to come up with something that worked. Bernstein, resentful of the fact that *Candide* was now being spoken of as a "great show" rather than a "great score," spent the last decade of his life putting back all the numbers Prince slung out, in an effort to make it unstageable again. Yet, when I saw the "authorized" version at the Old Vic in London a year before Bernstein died, I found it profoundly moving. Prince prefers his slick, keep-'em-moving reduction, full of cheap circus effects. But twenty years on, in the cavernous Gershwin Theatre, it's been blown up into a gaudy nightmare, burying the score completely.

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Art

Promising signs

by Mario Naves

"Love it hate it don't miss it" reads the advertisement, as seen in New York City subway trains, for the 1997 Whitney Biennial. Judging from the crowds milling through the Whitney, the majority of visitors who have answered that call seem to be merely curiosity seekers for whom museum exhibitions are less about art than fashion. ("Be there or be square" is the show's underlying motto.) The Biennial has, of course, lost whatever relevance it may once have had as a serious overview of contemporary American art. As a measure of the *Zeitgeist*, however, it is all too reliable. Suffice it to say that a show which has visitors pondering whether the "No Smoking" signs in the stairwell are works of art is one whose focus is, shall we say, lacking in aesthetic discrimination.

Curmudgeonly words, I know, and just a smattering of those dedicated to this predictably maligned event. Still, there have been reasons not to feel curmudgeonly about the New York art scene. Recently, a handful of gallery exhibitions offered a reminder of how vital an art capital New York can be. A few of the shows discussed below are of such quality that they merit full-scale museum treatments, and all of them call into question assumptions of what constitutes a viable American art, as well as that art's history. An exhibition of Richard Stankiewicz's sculptures from the 1950s, in particular, made much of what is considered major postwar American sculpture seem paltry by comparison. Toward the end of a season that seemed more jaded than the last, that's something to celebrate.

"Oscar Bluemner: American Modernist" at the Barbara Mathes Gallery through June 6 is an example of how commercial spaces can enrich our understanding of this country's response to early modernism, an era still not given a full accounting by our cultural custodians. Although Bluemner (1867–1938) was affiliated with Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291, he has never achieved the distinction of Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, or John Marin. His otherworldly depictions of architecture and landscape owe much to European painting, German Expressionism in particular, but it is a peculiarly American art. There is a pragmatism to Bluemner's mysticism—a reflection, perhaps, of his training as an architect—and, as the studies included here show, a most methodical artistry. Anyone who titles a painting *Emotional Reconstruction of a New Jersey Corner (Hoboken)* (1914) may seem altogether too willful to make his visions sing. Yet Bluemner's paintings resonate in a way that has everything to do with painting and, especially, color. The sour yellow of *Black by Gold* (1934) may give this minor masterpiece its foreboding ambiance, but it is the sonorous harmonies that Bluemner brings to his jewellike blues and reds that define him as a colorist.

A splendid sampling of Bluemner's works

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on paper displays his working methods to impressive effect. The seventeen studies for *Sonnet* (1935–36), amalgams of natural motifs and an almost didactic geometry, would have made a fine exhibition by themselves. Only in a group of watercolors and gouaches depicting suns and moons do Bluemner's spiritual tendencies approach outright hokum. Yet it is an indication of his gifts as a painter that Bluemner was able to make New Jersey—a New Jersey, I daresay, unfamiliar to most of us—as haunting, and even tragic, as it was here. In its understanding of Bluemner's merits and idiosyncrasies, "American Modernist" has a clarity of purpose that should serve as a model for exhibitions of its kind.

As should "Richard Stankiewicz: The 1950s" at Zabriskie, which closed in May. Calling Stankiewicz (1922–83) the originator of junk sculpture is likely to scare off those who have become accustomed to seeing crud passed off as art. Yet it would be foolish to blame Stankiewicz for what has followed in his wake. For he was a talent of sizable proportions, one with a keen eye for absurdist metaphor and a wry, almost stern, wit. There is a Dadaist bent to Stankiewicz's conglomerations of corroded machine parts, most of which are so specialized in nature they leave the layman baffled as to their purpose. If the use of detritus in art was once a matter of controversy, it is, at this date, a quaint argument. What marks Stankiewicz as an artist isn't the novelty of his materials, but his ability to divine the innate life in and between them. His sculptures are—as Irving Sandler aptly put it—"personages" of uncanny vitality and worthy heirs to the Constructivist tradition of Picasso, Julio Gonzàlez, and David Smith.

Stankiewicz's sculptural acuity is inseparable from his sense of humor. Whether it be as blatantly farcical as the trio of drones in *The Committee* (1954) or as droll as his priapic *Warrior* (1953), Stankiewicz's sculpture is marked by an unsentimental and wily humanity. These works may be comedic, but their humor gains depth, even at its broadest, upon repeated viewings. If anything, *The Committee* was funnier the second time around, and how many jokes can that be said of? Stankiewicz was also capable of lyricism. *Bird* (1953)—an impossibly evocative melding of an old-fashioned bathtub leg with some curving spokes of wire—was one of the most beautiful works of art to be seen in New York this season.

Oddly, the foyer of the New York Studio School galleries—which usually houses the guestbook, with room for little else—was just about perfect for looking at the eight small paintings that started off "Louisa Matthiasdottir: A Survey of Paintings, 1930s–1990s." The intimacy of the space let one concentrate on the artist's seemingly effortless virtuosity. Matthiasdottir's ability to conjure up a dog, for instance, with the barest dabs of brownish red and white in *Girl and Dog* (undated) provided a painterly magic that is all too rare nowadays.

"A Survey of Paintings," which ran in May and April, was too modest to qualify as a retrospective—writing in *The Times*, Holland Cotter accurately pegged it as an "homage"—but it made a strong case for her *oeuvre*. The exhibition consisted of landscapes, still lifes, and portraits, all distinguished by a crisp light and an unflashy painterly brevity. Matthiasdottir's paintings of her native Iceland were the least satisfying. Her tendency toward abstraction generalizes the landscape in a way that flattens the paintings, both literally and figuratively. A trio of self-portraits, ranging over a period of almost thirty years, was a striking centerpiece, but it was Matthiasdottir's still-life paintings that made the show. Each set-up is, if you will, meticulously posed. Squashes, cabbages, peppers, teapots, and grapefruit are juxtaposed with an almost sculptural sense of poise and interval. Although they may occupy the same tabletop, Matthiasdottir's objects rarely overlap, retaining a Platonic remoteness. When they do touch—as with the squash and frying pan in *Still Life with Frying Pan and Red Cabbage* (1979)—it makes for an under-

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stated spark of drama. These are lucid and assured works. Matthiasdottir's faculty as an artist is summed up, for me at least, in the upper right-hand section of *Untitled Still Life* (1995), where she states her case as a painter by bringing to life, of all things, a jar of grape jelly.

The paintings in Frances Barth's show at Donahue/Sosinski Art in April and May were as puzzling as any I have seen in her previous exhibitions. Patterns, textures, and diagrammatic bits of topography are set against broad, brushy, gridlike fields. Barth's shards of space, image, and color are unsettling, if not quite jarring. Hers is an art of fragmentation, and it's hard to know what to make of it. The paintings are certainly that of a sophisticated artist. Her palette —full of muted creams, pinks, rusts, and browns—is like no one else's, and there is an endearingly unstudied quality to her paint handling.

All the same, I am hard pressed to say whether her ambition and complexity translate into integrated paintings. There is a pedantic tone to the work, and I don't think Barth is immune to Conceptualist strategies. Yet the paintings are oddly of a piece. The best here, *I'm on My Way Home* (1996) —a vertical canvas divided into five dark fields of scratchy markings offset by a band of bluish yellow light—was the most classically realized of Barth's compositions. The most recent in the show, it is, perhaps, a portent of things to come. Despite my ambivalence to these works' looseness, I hope Barth doesn't iron out her quirks in the search for pictorial unity, and I look forward to this elusive and engaging artist's next exhibition.

Is it possible for a painting to be too beautiful? Robert Kushner's incredibly lush paintings of flowers, fruit, and fish at DC Moore Gallery were evidence of his continuing fascination with the decorative. Beauty is, of course, anathema to the "serious" art of our time, and if there is a pitfall Kushner risks it is kitsch. If I recall correctly, Kushner's previous exhibition contained more gold leaf and glitter than seen here, materials used by painters desperate for pictorial pizzazz. Kushner isn't desperate—or, for that matter, ironic—but he is out to maximize pizzazz. Even with the glitter and gold at a minimum, the recent paintings are ostentatiously dynamic and not kitschy in the least. What makes them so winning is Kushner's willingness to go over the top, or, to employ the vernacular, he's not afraid of falling on his ass.

Kushner's love for Asian and Islamic art is unmistakable in the fluidity of his line and the vibrancy of his colors. He also reveals an admiration for Matisse, yet I wish Kushner took to heart the French master's gift for pictorial structure. Kushner has difficulty reconciling his floral imagery with the ground on which it is placed. His flowers are, basically, drawn on either blocky patterns or atmospheric washes of acrylic paint. Although Kushner is better off with the latter tack, neither makes his paintings as full or as sharp as they could be. *April Byobu* (1995), for example, is a sumptuous compendium of painterly incident but its cluttered geometric backdrop makes it hard to look at. Still, it is tough (and silly) to deny Kushner's chromatic seductions. When a painting as ripe as *Sarabande* (1997) connects, it reminds one of how exhilirating painting can be. And Kushner connects more often than not.

At the DC Moore Gallery, a matronly woman, who had arrived with a tour group, exclaimed before she even got off the elevator, "Oh my God! This is gorgeous!," which is more enthusiasm by far than I witnessed at the Biennial. The crew at the Whitney may well dismiss such sentiments —God forbid that anyone should engage with a work of art in a way that goes beyond mere bemusement. Yet the great irony is that there is more bravery—and, needless to say, art—in one of Kushner's orchids than is to be found in the entirety of the oh-so-transgressive Biennial. In an age of irony, could beauty be the final transgression? We can only hope.

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Discovering Lovis Corinth

by Karen Wilkin

The German painter Lovis Corinth is not exactly a household word in this country. If pressed, informed New Yorkers may be able to connect him with an uncomfortable, agitated self-portrait in the Museum of Modern Art in which the brushstrokes seem to be stirred by a strong wind, blurring the image of the bullet-headed, blunt-nosed painter and muddying the color. Barnard alumnae of a certain vintage, if they were lucky enough to have been invited to see Professor Julius Held's collection, should remember a vigorous head of a man in a dark fedora. The really knowledgeable might mention the show at the Gallery of Modern Art in 1964 or the Corinth print exhibition held at the National Gallery, Washington, a few years ago. There was an impressive group of his portraits and nudes shown at the Royal Academy, London, in 1985 as part of a rather skewed survey of twentieth-century German art designed to establish legitimate bloodlines for such recently emerged stars as Baselitz, Penck, and Kiefer. But generally there have been few opportunities to see Corinth's work in any depth outside of Germany—and not many within his native country, either—so despite his claim to a place in the pantheon of German modernists, he remains an elusive figure who hovers on the periphery of the history of twentieth-century painting, even on the periphery of the consciousness of those of us who care passionately about that history.

Even if you have a clear idea of what Corinth's work looks like, he poses problems. It's difficult to figure out just where he fits in. The all-out ferocity of his late paintings makes it seem logical to associate him with the German Expressionists, but even the most emotionally unbuttoned of Corinth's late works are free of the self-conscious primitivism of Nolde or Kirchner. Corinth's cool, drab palette and loosely scrawled touch seem notably unlike the brilliant hues and jagged shapes of the majority of the Expressionists. In any event, Corinth belonged to a different generation and had a different formation as an artist; born in 1858, he was a decade Nolde's senior and old enough to have been Kirchner's or Kokoschka's father. The differences are perhaps clearest in Corinth's earlier work, a wide-ranging assortment of portraits, self-portraits, nudes, allegories, religious paintings, and occasional landscapes that bears witness both to his stubborn individuality and his sense of continuity with the past. These pictures are far more conservative than anything by Der Blaue Reiter or Die Brücke. It seems plain that unlike his iconoclastic younger colleagues, Corinth didn't wish to break with his heritage, but rather to explore it in contemporary terms. Then, too, the coexistence of Corinth's urgent, broken brushstroke with the passionate, heightened realism that animates his portraits and redeems all but his most florid mythological and biblical paintings has

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led to his being viewed as a link between Impressionism and Expressionism—which seems neither helpful nor accurate.

Even so discerning and progressive a critic as Julius Meier-Graefe—whose portrait Corinth painted in 1917—had difficulty with this unclassifiable artist. Meier-Graefe, who admired French art and revered Delacroix, Renoir, and Cézanne, was at first skeptical about Corinth, but he was eventually, almost unwillingly, won over by the sheer intensity, the "overwhelming sense of nature" of his compatriot's art. In the golden brown portrait, now in the Musée d'Orsay, the critic looks alert, restless, and impatient, the instability of his pose perhaps echoing his ambivalence. In 1914, Meier-Graefe described Corinth as "a Realist who lacks Realism, an intellectual without an intellectual upbringing . . . a man for whom the world is not his model, but rather a battlefield, a playground, an arena in which to learn from experience"; later the critic wrote to Corinth that he admired him "as the last great German with something important to say."

During the past year, from last May to this, a major retrospective of Corinth's work, the result of a collaboration among the Haus der Kunst, the Nationalgalerie, the Saint Louis Art Museum, and the Tate Gallery, traveled from Munich to Berlin to St. Louis to London.[1] According to its organizers, the show was designed "to make Corinth's work better known in both Germany and abroad," and, through a reassessment of the artist's achievement from the varying perspectives of American, British, and German contributors, to reveal "the intensity and complexity of Corinth's art and . . . personality." They hoped, too, they declared, to raise as many questions as they answered. They succeeded very well in all respects. Seeing the entire trajectory of Corinth's art—a body of work spanning more than forty years—made both his individuality and his range apparent; learning more about his history helped to clarify his relationship to his colleagues. But in the end, this enigmatic painter seemed as much odd man out as he ever did. If anything, the retrospective simply made his idiosyncrasies more evident.

In fact, the most striking aspect of the exhibition—apart from the surprise of seeing Corinth whole for the first time—was the variousness of his approach, which was easily tracked in the exhibit's stunning self-portraits, documents equally of the painter's changing appearance and his evolving pictorial aspirations. (Like Rembrandt and Courbet—to whom he looked as models—Corinth regularly painted himself in a variety of roles and costumes.) Corinth's subjects can be academic, transgressive, or anything in between. Startling frankness and near-sentimentality follow hard upon one another. Paint handling ranges from silky, ribbony near-Impressionist strokes to brutal slathers. Efforts to reprise the excellences of the past coexist with "modern" realism, although it should be noted that even the most traditional and idealized of Corinth's pictures are wrenched and funky, the most forthright, peculiarly supercharged. *Nana, Female Nude* (1911, Saint Louis Art Museum) is typical. At once an imagined image of Zola's famous character and a portrait of a specific individual with her clothes off, *Nana* is both an homage to idealized voluptuousness and an essay in roughly brushed, pneumatic truthfulness. It's a weird, tumescent picture—Rubens heightened to an almost unbearable pitch. (*Nana* wreaks havoc with the otherwise

1 "Lovis Corinth" opened at the Saint Louis Art Museum on November 14, 1996, and closed on January 26, 1997. The exhibition was first seen at the Haus der Kunst, Munich (May 4–July 21, 1996), and then at the Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (August 2–October 20, 1996). After closing in St. Louis, the exhibition was seen at the Tate Gallery, London (February, 20–May 4, 1997). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Peter-Klaus Schuster, Christoph Vitali, and Barbara Butts, has been published by the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Tate Gallery (391 pages, $70; 39.95 paper).

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matter-of-fact prose of the male German author of the catalogue entry: "unrelenting in its eroticism," he pants, "the breasts in particular oozing lasciviousness.") The overtly seductive *Nana* is not unique in Corinth's *oeuvre*. Yet other female images, clothed and unclothed, whether of the artist's wife or of women who sat for commissioned portraits, are just as striking for their sympathy, their psychological penetration, their sense of capturing a complex, unpredictable individual in the material of paint.

The most dramatic shift in Corinth's style occurred after 1911, when the fifty-three-year-old painter suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed, but able to paint. This frightening experience also seems to have been curiously liberating. The nervous, brushy landscapes, still lifes, and figures (including the self-portrait from 1924 at MOMA) that Corinth executed in the thirteen years remaining to him after 1912 are among his boldest and most fevered, as well as his most freely painted. The Nazis, who read a celebration of Teutonic ideals in Corinth's earlier work, declared these late paintings "decadent"—that the painter's widow was Jewish probably didn't help—citing them as obvious products of a diseased individual.

It's worth noting that all of the Corinths included in the 1985 show at the Royal Academy were from the late years. Was this an aesthetic or a political choice? The question arises because the cumulative effect of the retrospective, despite the obvious disparities of theme and degrees of naturalism, is less of disjunction than of single-minded pursuit of passionate intensity. What unites Corinth's works from first to last is their tension, their fierce willfulness. Some of his most intimate images—portraits of his wife and children, for example—are notably affectionate and tender, but they are often no less vigorously painted or boldly drawn than the raw, "public" works, such as the large-scale scenes from the Passion of Christ and from mythology. Many of Corinth's "pre-stroke" pictures, such as the revealing *Self-Portrait with Model* (1903, Kunsthaus, Zurich), prove less different from his rapidly brushed late works than is to be expected. In the self-portrait from 1903—an image haunted by Edvard Munch, albeit with anxiety replaced by sheer sexiness—Corinth, in an open-necked white shirt, is embraced by his young wife, who turns her nude back to the viewer. Over her shoulder, the painter stares out at us, brandishing his palette and a fistful of brushes. The touch in *Self-Portrait with Model* is fairly restrained, the drawing solid, verging on the academic, but the mood of the picture is as sensual and emotionally charged as the most juicily painted late works, executed almost two decades later. (Just what can be concluded from the fact that the unstable still lifes of Corinth's last years are as sensual and emotionally charged as his earlier portraits of his wife is another matter.)

The contradictions implicit in Corinth's art have parallels in his history. While learning more about this history may help to locate the artist within a context, his life underscores apparent inconsistencies without offering any explanation for them. Corinth came from a modest background of farmers and tanners, yet his father encouraged his art career and supported his studies. The young painter's training was traditional, sophisticated, thorough, and international, yet his most nominally conventional early work was already tinged with the shocking brutality of his last, most experimental paintings—not that the young Academy student was a closet modernist. You wouldn't suspect from even the campiest and fleshiest of his youthful bacchanals that he was Bouguereau's student in the late 1880s—Corinth's paint surfaces are always brushy, never licked. Even so, it's clear that the young German was indifferent to the innovations of the Parisian vanguard of the period. Yet the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists were later to affect him deeply. The increasing freedom of Corinth's work in the early 1900s, when he exhibited as a member of the essentially conservative Berlin Secession, is a direct reflection of his in-

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creasing admiration for Manet and Cézanne, whose paintings he saw exhibited in Paul Cassirer's celebrated gallery. It's tempting to explain Corinth's loose, daring late style as a culmination of his embrace of modernist ideals, but for all his enthusiasm and his obvious understanding of the importance of advanced French art in general, and of Manet and Cézanne in particular, at the end of his life Corinth was apparently embittered and hostile to innovative art. His late paintings look radical, but their author was anything but sympathetic to radical painting in the years before his death in 1925.

The much-publicized "rebirth" of German painting in the 1980s provided a new, updated context for Corinth—as that controversial Royal Academy show in 1985 strove to make clear. Carla Schulz-Hoffmann's essay in the catalogue accompanying the recent retrospective tackles this subject, along with critical responses to Corinth's work over the years—before, during, and after National Socialism. Like most of the essays and entries in the well-illustrated, comprehensive, and generally informative catalogue, Ms. Schulz-Hoffmann's contribution is all too freshly translated from the German, but it's absorbing reading until she attempts to connect Corinth with his "heirs."

While noting that his temperamental connections with other "loners" and their shared "attitude to painting" are worth considering, as is "the concrete example of particular works," she prefers to find clues to his legitimate successors in Corinth's "artistic positions," the "contradictions and conflicts that appear as paradigms in his personality and in his work," and his "perseverance in treating the great subjects of art in a free, untamed and undogmatic manner." I'm cynical enough to notice that the heirs recognized by Ms. Schulz-Hoffmann are all artists currently much in favor—Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, and Georg Baselitz—but at least there are visible connections, formal as much as material, between their work and that of their presumed ancestor. The equally fashionable but otherwise unrelated Cy Twombly gets shoehorned in because he said that, when he was a student in Boston in the late 1940s, he admired "Corinth as well as Beckmann and Kokoschka". That Ms. Schulz-Hoffmann should co-opt Twombly to her cause is not surprising; that this is the only mention of Beckmann in relation to Corinth—oblique as it is—is astonishing.

Beckmann could not have failed to know Corinth's work and although he was nearly thirty years younger, probably knew the man as well, since their years in Berlin overlapped and both were associated with the Berlin Secession and with Paul Cassirer. "The concrete example of particular works" is persuasive, obvious differences in paint-handling, picture structure, and palette notwithstanding. The similarities between Beckmann's early pictures and Corinth's are plain, although not unexpected, given their common affiliation with the Berlin Secession. Yet even after World War I, which matured Beckmann's art, making it tougher, "darker," and more original, affinities are visible.

Like Corinth, Beckmann painted himself obsessively, repeatedly, in self-portraits that fuse self-scrutiny with role-playing. Like Corinth, Beckmann staged elaborate theatrical scenes on canvas, some with biblical overtones, others with mythological themes—in Beckmann's case, both Northern and classical—translated into modern guises. An entry in Corinth's informal autobiography sounds like a description of a Beckmann triptych. Sent by his family to school in Königsberg, from eight to thirteen, Corinth lived with an idiosyncratic aunt, who impressed him greatly. Years later, the painter recalled "the friends to whom my aunt gave a bed for the night, fortune tellers, guardians of the poor, and many other personalities who seemed to me more interesting than conventional people." The correspondences between Corinth's and Beckmann's work are not only of subject,

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but of mood, of what a colleague versed in psychological terms calls "feeling-tone."

The most dramatic parallel is offered by Corinth's *The Blinded Samson* (1912, Nationalgalerie, Berlin), his first large painting following his stroke. Perhaps a disguised self-portrait, Corinth's nearly nude Samson is powerful but not young. Grimacing beneath a bloodstained blindfold, he plunges through an ordinary green-painted doorway, thrusting enormous, shackled hands before him, as though about to burst the confines of the canvas. It's an unforgettable, chilling image and one that Beckmann wouldn't have been ashamed to have painted. He'd have handled the paint and modeling differently, and layered his color more, but likenesses outweigh unlikenesses, so much so that I'm beginning to wonder if the bound and mutilated figures who appear in so many of Beckmann's disturbing dramas aren't descendants of Corinth's Samson. I don't think it's simply that the two painters shared ancestors and aspirations. I ought to spend more time checking the documentation. Ms. Schulz-Hoffmann's is not the final word.

Exhibition notes

"The Human Form Divine: William Blake from the Paul Mellon Collection" at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven. April 2–July 6, 1997

Whatever else can be said about the poet, artist, and mythopoeic visionary William Blake (1757–1827), he is certainly the most forbidding of the English Romantic poets. "He approached everything with a mind unclouded by current opinions," T. S. Eliot remarked in his essay on Blake. Eliot understood that if Blake's more esoteric poetry is unpleasant, it nonetheless "has the unpleasantness of great poetry." Blake's poetry possessed a terrible honesty. And "in a world too frightened to be honest," such blunt honesty naturally makes him seem "peculiarly terrifying." That is to say, Blake affected nothing: his manifold idiosyncrasies and obscurities were entirely sincere. If, as Eliot argues, they ultimately kept Blake from being a "classic," they nevertheless imbued his work with an unforgettable individuality and determination.

Most people who read Blake find themselves charmed by the limpid songs and poems in his early *Poetical Sketches* (1783). Among the engraved and hand-colored "illuminated works," some of the *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794) and a handful of epigrams from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790–1793) have fixed themselves indelibly in the public imagination. ("Little Lamb who made thee," "Tyger Tyger, burning bright," "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom," etc.) This side of Blake's work is distinguished by a fetching lyric purity, an intense transparency of feeling and diction. Almost everything else—above all the epics and "prophecies"—remains pretty much a closed book. Blake compared his longest and most ambitious poem, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, to "Homer's Iliad or Milton's Paradise Lost." But his first biographer anticipated most future readers when he described it as "not only abstruse but according to common rules of criticism as near ridiculous, as it is heterogeneous." Nevertheless, Blake has always appealed to the spiritually unorthodox, and has included among his admirers giants like Swinburne, Yeats, and Shaw as well as poseurs like Allen Ginsberg and the other Beats.

Blake made his living, such as it was, as an engraver and book illustrator. He managed to sell fewer than two hundred copies of his own illuminated books during his lifetime. So obscure a figure was he that, in 1818, he was actually pronounced dead by a publisher who had appropriated one of his engravings for the frontispiece of a collection of sacred music, inscribing the plate "Drawn by the late W. Blake Esq. RA."

Blake's accomplishment as an artist was just as idiosyncratic—and just as robustly individual—as his poetry. I remember one scholar, faced with an exhibition of Blake's

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art, concluding in exasperation that he was "a second-rate poet and a third-rate artist." The ambitious exhibition of Blake's artwork now on view at the Yale Center for British Art—a celebratory event meant to commemorate the Center's twentieth anniversary—does not support that judgment. But it does not exactly contradict it, either. Yale's incomparable collection of Blake's works, assembled over the years by Paul Mellon, has allowed the curator, Patrick Noon, to mount a comprehensive exhibition of Blake's *oeuvre*. The three hundred objects on view cover the entire range of Blake's art, his hand-colored illuminated manuscripts, his engravings, his watercolors, his illustrations of the Bible, of *The Divine Comedy*, of Thomas Gray's poems, and Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. This is Blake at his best, and his worst.

The curious thing about Blake is that the one is often so close to the other. When they work, Blake's drawings and engravings have a rude, mesmerizing power; when they fail, they seem merely crude, at times almost laughable. It is easy to dislike Blake's art. Once seen, however, it is impossible to forget. What Eliot said about Blake's poetry holds true of his art as well: "His philosophy, like his visions, like his insight, like his technique, was his own, and accordingly he was inclined to attach more importance to it than an artist should." It made Blake unmistakably Blake; it also made him eccentric and "inclined to formlessness." Much of Blake's artwork was so bound up with his mythopoeic imaginings that, apart from the vision, it seems unintelligible or—worse—downright silly. In one of his most famous epigrams, Blake wrote that "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's." Blake succeeded in creating his own system, all right. But, as this exhibition reminds us, it is possible to be enslaved by a system of one's own devising, too.

A catalogue of the exhibition, by Patrick Noon, has been published by the Yale Center for British Art and Yale University Press (87 pages, $35; $15.95 paper).

—Roger Kimball

"Odd Nerdrum: Paintings"
at the Forum Gallery, New York.
May 8–June 27, 1997

The Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum (born 1944) has been exhibiting his work with some regularity in New York since 1983, yet he remains a fugitive figure as far as the official art world is concerned. His paintings are only rarely seen in the museums or discussed in the glossy art journals, and on this side of the Atlantic, anyway, his work almost never turns up in surveys of contemporary art. Even the solo exhibition that toured a number of American museums a couple of years ago, though it undoubtedly made a considerable impression on the people who saw it, failed to establish Mr. Nerdrum as a familiar name. I went to see it in Pittsburgh on the day the international art press had assembled for a preview of the Carnegie International Exhibition, yet very few of the critics, curators, and collectors who had come to town for that event—from which, needless to say, Mr. Nerdrum's paintings had been excluded—even bothered to take a look at his show.

A large part of the reason is that Mr. Nerdrum's paintings, with their unsettling, often violent allegorical themes and their unapologetic recourse to a Rembrandtesque pictorial style, repudiate virtually all the reigning orthodoxies of contemporary art. They are proudly anti-modernist, yet they owe little, if anything, to the political posturing of the postmodernist camp. This is an art that doesn't fit into any of the trends, fashions, or other excitements on offer at the moment, and its flaunting of Old Master methods and a narrative allegorical subject matter leaves at least some of the people who do get to see Mr. Nerdrum's work quite baffled, if not offended.

The ten paintings from 1996–97 in his latest exhibition at the Forum Gallery are unlikely to alter this situation. Except for two portraits—one of the artist's daughter and one of himself—they are all paintings on horrific themes. *Unarmed Man* gives us a

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seated nude male whose left arm has been amputated at the shoulder and whose right has been amputated just below the elbow. Almost equally unsparing in its melancholy are the elderly naked figures in *Three Men at Dawn*. Most horrifying of all, perhaps, is the painting called *Release*, with its ghastly scene of a terrified young woman in the process of being buried alive by a malevolent warrior of some kind.

The scenarios of these allegorical paintings, though without any precise analogues in historical time, are clearly meant to illuminate the moral horrors of our epoch. In this sense, at least, their subject matter and the sense of moral outrage with which it is treated is as "modern" as *Guernica*. What is so unsettling for many people is, of course, that their style is so radically reactionary—and, what is even more amazing, so persuasive in its reactionary conviction. For Mr. Nerdrum is a master of the figurative style he has fabricated to give his terrifying subjects the moral gravity he believes to be their due. In this respect, too, his art exists at a great distance from much else that nowadays passes for notable achievement.

—*Hilton Kramer*

We mourn the passing of Sydney J. Freedberg
1914–1997
A valued contributor to The New Criterion

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Music

Master of decadence

by James F. Penrose

I understand perfectly when a musician says today, "I hate Wagner, but I can no longer endure any other music."
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen, Ein Bühnfestspiel für drei Tage und einen Vorabend* ("A Theater Festival Play for Three Days and a Preliminary Evening") was composed over a period of twenty-six years. Four operas constitute the work: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* ("The Twilight of the Gods"). As suggested by the subtitle, Wagner intended the work to be presented over four days.

Though composed in sequence musically, the libretto of *The Ring* was written in reverse order. By November 1848, the composer had completed a long poem he called *Siegfrieds Tod* ("Siegfried's Death"), more or less similar to the present-day *Götterdämmerung*. Wagner quickly realized that the complexities of *Siegfrieds Tod* could not be accommodated in a single work. In 1851, he wrote a "prequel" called *Der junge Siegfried* ("The Young Siegfried") which corresponds to *Siegfried*, the work for the third day. Wagner extended his dramatic foundations even further with texts for *Die Walküre* and the prefatory *Das Rheingold*, finishing the poem in December 1852. Initially, Wagner made rapid progress with the music. *Das Rheingold* was finished by mid-1854, *Die Walküre* by spring 1856, and much of *Siegfried* by mid-1857. By that point, however, Wagner was wrung out. *Siegfried* was not to be completed for more than twelve years; *Götterdämmerung* was completed five years after that, in 1875. *The Ring* was first performed in its entirety by Hans Richter at the newly built Festspielhaus in Bayreuth in August 1876. The entire cycle was first heard in abridged form in the United States in 1889, during the Metropolitan Opera's sixth season.

The Met's current production of *The Ring* has evolved since 1986, *Die Walküre* being the first of the series to be performed. *Das Rheingold* was introduced the following year, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* in 1988. The complete cycle was offered by the Met in spring 1989, the first time in fifty years that it was performed within the span of a week, pretty much in the spirit of *ein Bühnfestspiel für drei Tage und einen Vorabend*. The current cycle is the first since 1990 and is conducted, as have been all *Ring*s since 1988, by James Levine. The performances under review were heard over a five-week period in March and April.[1]

1 *Das Rheingold* was performed on Saturday afternoon, March 29, 1997; *Die Walküre* on Saturday afternoon, April 12; *Siegfried* on Saturday evening, April 19; and *Götterdämmerung* on Saturday evening, April 26. The production for all performances was by Otto Schenck, with sets by Günther Schneider-Siemssen, costumes by Rolf Langenfass, and lighting by Gil Wechsler.

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It was difficult, as one walked about the foyer of the Met before each performance, to comprehend just how controversial a figure Wagner had once been. For the most part, today's music lovers flock to hear Wagner with the complacency that they bring to Verdi or Puccini. To be sure, the sheer physical demands of *The Ring* require something special from an audience (just as the steep ticket prices demand something special from its pocketbook). But Wagner's absorption into the mainstream of concert programming has done much to domesticate him. Besides, today's sophisticated audiences are virtually shock-proof, or think they are. The outrageousness of Wagner's music dramas, with their episodes of incest and lurid mythopoesis, are simply business as usual. So it wasn't until *The Ring* really got underway that the truly seductive effect of Wagner's music made itself felt, dissolving the audience's knowing complacency in an ecstasy of artistic transport.

As the music of *Das Rheingold* washed over a mesmerized audience, it became clear why no composer before or since has provoked such extremes of emotion as did Richard Wagner. After hearing a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, an apprehensive Mark Twain wrote, "I know of some, and have heard of many, who could not sleep after it, but cried the night away. I feel strongly out of place here. Sometimes I feel like the one sane person in the community of the mad." This sort of reaction was on the mild side: *The Musical Times* once averred that singers were literally dying of Wagner's music, naming the soprano Marie Wilk (suicide), bass Emil Scaria (died insane), and Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld (dropped dead after *Tristan*) as three prominent victims. While Wagner did not, of course, have the same effect on the general population, no composer since Beethoven has had as profound an effect on Western culture. Joyce and Proust; Whistler, Cézanne, and Renoir; Debussy, Elgar, Bartók, and Schönberg have all acknowledged their debt to, in Pierre Louÿs's overstatement, "the greatest man who had ever existed. . . . I didn't say he was great God himself, though in fact I was inclined to say something of this sort."

Wagner's mature style was based, among other things, on the creation of an underlying tonality meant to represent a scene's particular emotional hue. Words and even syllables are subjected to far-ranging modulations through related and remote keys to intensify their emotional effect. For Nietzsche, the delicacy of this technique was so affecting that he was moved to describe the result visually: Wagner's "wealth of colors, of half shadows, of the secrecies of dying light spoils one to such an extent that afterward almost all other musicians seem too robust."

Wagner came late to Wagnerism. In his earlier operas, such as *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, and *Tannhäuser*, Wagner showed himself an accomplished melodist much influenced by Bellini. The theoretical underpinnings of Wagner's later style lay in *The Work of Art of the Future* (1849), *Opera and Drama* (1850), and *A Message to My Friends* (1851), essays he wrote in his late thirties. Looking to Beethoven's D-minor *Choral* symphony as his model, Wagner developed a theory of artistic expression that he termed the "emotionalizing of the intellect." Wagner believed that the harmonic structure of the *Choral* symphony (as evidenced by Beethoven's vocal and orchestral textures) created a matchless, and completely novel, effect. This effect largely originated in Beethoven's thematic treatment of melody.

Where Beethoven wrote for the concert hall, keeping within the bounds of the (loosely defined) sonata form, Wagner went further. He adapted and intensified Beethoven's system of thematic and harmonic development through his own highly innovative musical technique. In so doing, Wagner concentrated the dramatic power of music to a degree that has never been surpassed. The critic Donald Tovey pointed out that for both Beethoven and Wagner, imperfections of style resulting from their

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approach to harmony tend to become useful, expressive qualities: "The rough counterpart strikes fire where smooth counterpoint would glide past unperceived; the melody, shy in repose, violent in movement, and always more at home with instruments than with voices, becomes most human where it is most intractable."

Perhaps Wagner's most characteristic feature was his creation of a musical grammar for his works, especially his use of "leading motives" (*Leitmotiven*): recurring musical phrases associated with individuals, events, and emotions. In themselves, "leading motives" were nothing new—Berlioz (with his *idée fixe*) and Weber both used them. But particularly in *The Ring*, where there are almost one hundred such themes, Wagner took the device to new heights. The ceaseless repetition of *Leitmotiven* over fifteen hours has a strong subliminal effect and binds the work emotionally and structurally into an organic whole. Through the complex deployment of *Leitmotiven* and kindred techniques, Wagner sought to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a "total work of art" that blended music, drama, and poetry in a spectacle whose ultimate ambition was as much mythical as artistic. *The Ring*, *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal* are examples of practical aesthetics in which the Wagnerian ideal—that his listeners should know his works through *feeling* rather than by analysis—is realized.

Such theoretical explanations of Wagner's intentions, however, are of little use in capturing his overwhelming effect on susceptible listeners. In *The Perfect Wagnerite*, George Bernard Shaw noted that even awful performances of *The Ring* caused listeners to go "raving about the theater between acts in ecstasies of deluded admiration." Thomas Mann—not someone given to Dionysian expostulations—wrote of his "hours filled with frissons and delights for the nerves and intellect alike, with sudden glimpses into things of profound and moving significance" and filled his works (*Buddenbrooks*, *Death in Venice*, *Dr. Faustus*) with Wagnerian overtones. The phenomenon was particularly acute in France, becoming the height of fashion, even among the tone-deaf. In 1885, the writer Eduard Dujardin founded the *Revue Wagnerienne* whose contributors included the notorious Houston Stewart Chamberlain and J. K. Huysmans (author of the decadent classic *A rebours*). A backlash was bound to occur. Total repudiation was rare, but artists began to pull away from Wagner's force field. One way was through humor: once-weepy Wagnerians like Chabrier, Fauré, and Messager wrote rambunctious quadrilles for piano for four hands that parodied sacred passages from *Tristan* and *The Ring*. By the time Debussy got around to writing *The Children's Corner Suite*, poking fun at the dying Tristan was old hat.

Wagner's music is discomfiting partly because of its extreme sensuousness. Indeed, Wagner is surely the most erotic composer in all of music. His is not the boyish ardor of the Mendelssohn Octet or the fetching seductiveness of Mozart's Susanna, or the impassioned dignity of Norma. Wagner's has a heavy, *morbidezza*-like quality which, as his biographer Ernest Newman hints, is an accurate reflection of Wagner's own erotically charged personality. *Tristan und Isolde*, in particular, conjured up the most elemental of urgings. Typical was a passage in Jacques Vontade's turn-of-the-century novel *La Lueur sur la Cime* where André says that Wagner's music gives him "une envie excessive de vous embrasser à fond." Many have found this physical reflex distasteful, the Scottish composer Cecil Gray calling it "a sure sign of arrested development and unfulfilled sexual experience."

Another problem is Wagner's terrible reputation as a remorseless philanderer, violent revolutionary, enthusiastic anti-Semite, physical coward, and consummate egomaniac. That these personal qualities are somewhat beside the point in any serious consideration of his music is often forgotten, as is the fact that personal unpleasantness in varying degrees often coexists with genius.

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A more serious objection to the *Zukunftmusik* (the "Music of the Future") associated with Wagner, Liszt, and, to a lesser extent, Berlioz, was that it violates important canons of composition, taste, and emotional decorum. As the critic Eduard Hanslick (a confirmed anti-Wagnerian) put it, such music rested on a "distortion, a perversion of basic musical laws, a style contrary to the nature of human hearing and feeling." Dismayed by Wagner's luxuriousness, by his ceaselessly virtuosic theatricality, Hanslick observed that when an art arrives at a period of utmost luxury, it is already on the decline: "Wagner's opera style recognizes only superlatives; but a superlative has no future. It is the end, not the beginning." These days, Hanslick has the reputation of being the archetypal cultural reactionary but his remarks on Wagner are, in many respects, close to the mark. His tone resonates in the sentiments of an even more illustrious thinker.

From enthusiastic partisanship in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche progressed to scathing disillusionment in *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. Nietzsche came to see Wagner as a corrupter and falsifier of the musical ideal, as a decadent who pursued effect, not art. Distinguishing between the "Romantic" and the "tragic" or "Dionysian" sensibility, Nietzsche repudiated Wagnerism as "diseased." "Every art, every philosophy," Nietzsche wrote in *The Gay Science*,

> may be viewed as an aid and remedy in the service of growing and striving life: they always presuppose suffering and sufferers. But there are two kinds of sufferer: firstly he who suffers from a superabundance of life, who desires a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of and insight into life, and then he who suffers from a poverty of life, who seeks in art and knowledge either rest, peace, a smooth sea, delivery from himself, or intoxication, paroxysm, stupefaction, madness. The twofold requirement of the latter corresponds to all Romanticism in art and knowledge, [and to] . . . Richard Wagner.

Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner has never been effectively refuted. Yet there is something strange about Nietzche's case against his former friend and mentor. He writes of Wagner in the same wistful tone that a recovering alcoholic uses when recalling his drinking days. In describing Wagner's music, Nietzsche writes of its "glances, tendernesses, and comforting words in which nobody has anticipated him, the master of tones of a heavy-hearted and drowsy happiness." Nietzsche criticizes Wagner for emotional counterfeiting; but Nietzsche, too, bristles with false notes here, especially when he attempts to outline alternatives to Wagner. He praises *Carmen* as his musical ideal, but most of us will find that as hard to accept as Schopenhauer's singling out of Rossini (of all people) as a musical paragon. As relentless as Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner is, in the end Wagnerian ambivalence triumphs. This most implacable critic admitted that Wagner was the greatest influence in his life.

The opening of *Das Rheingold* exhibits Wagner's power at its most seductive. The work starts in a darkened house with the orchestra playing a deep open fifth rooted in E-flat, gradually diffusing into arpeggios. As the scenery lightens to a green mistiness, the orchestral arpeggios become more powerfully defined and the music makes its first (and very effective) modulation as Woglinde, a Rhinemaiden, begins to sing her alliterative "Weia, waga, woge du welle" ("Waft your waves you waters") in A-flat. The shimmering effect is like hovering on the threshold of a dream.

The Rhinemaidens move with a slithering, grass-like sinuousity, as Alberich, a Nibelung dwarf, emerges from his subriparian cave. His groping advances are repulsed, but in a spectacularly indiscreet admission, the Rhinemaidens reveal to Alberich the power of their Rhinegold: he who controls it (and the ring made from it) will rule the world. Tired of being mocked and frustrated in love, Alberich feels he has nothing to lose by stealing the gold. Ek-

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kehad Wlaschiha was quite effective as the repellent dwarf, as was the ensemble of coquettish and dimwitted Rhinemaidens.

The scene shifts to a mountaintop where Wotan, king of the gods, and his wife, Fricka, awake to find Valhalla, their newly built palace. To consolidate his power, Wotan has commissioned Valhalla from two giants, Fafner and Fasolt. In payment, Wotan, who had promised to cede the gods' eternal youth (as embodied in the goddess Freia), gives instead the Rhinegold which he steals from Alberich, who in a fit of spite fatally curses the ring. Wotan pays the giants, and the gods enter Valhalla.

A great strength of this production was its superb cast with James Morris's superlative Wotan providing the foundation. Graham Clark's Loge was also extremely good. Small, grinning, and Mephisto-like, he jetted on stage in a puff of sulphurous smoke. Hanna Schwartz was refreshing as Fricka. She brought a quiet dignity to a character who is often portrayed as a weary matron, sick to death of her spouse's continuing infidelities.

After *Rheingold* concludes, Fafner transforms himself into a dragon, retiring to sleep upon his treasure. The gods will not be secure in Valhalla until the ring is recovered. Wotan, however, as the embodiment of the rule of law, must not steal from Fafner. If Wotan is to possess the ring, it must be without his direct intervention. To this end, Wotan must create a hero who will unconsciously do his bidding. The creation of that hero is the subject of *Die Walküre*.

In her spouse's absence, Sieglinde, the wife of Hunding, offers refuge to Siegmund. Siegmund and Sieglinde immediately take more than a casual interest in each other. Act One of *Die Walküre* shows the fidelity of the Met's production to Wagner's own conception. Where Bayreuth these days costumes the gods as fedora-wearing mobsters, the New York realization is classical in ambition. Many of Wagner's own meticulous stage directions are scrupulously observed. In the first scene, Sieglinde, exactly as Wagner specifies, "with quiet deliberation opens the cupboard, fills a drinking horn and then sprinkles some herbs into it from a box." Then, just as indicated bar-for-bar in the score, she looks around to see Siegmund, who all the while is watching her. This precise choreography continues until "with a final look at Siegmund she goes into the bedroom and shuts the door behind her." The effect of such traditional staging is that we are untroubled by interpretative incongruities and find ourselves increasingly vulnerable to the insidious spell of the music.

Throughout Act One, Wagner's scoring anticipates the delicate inevitability of *Tristan*. Watching the halting and growing love between the two counterpointed by the blackening irritation of Hunding, the continuous tension and release of the music knocks away one emotional prop after another. By the end of the act, after Siegmund has seized the sword from the ash tree, discovered that Sieglinde is his sister, and is preparing to take the ultimate advantage of his host's hospitality, the audience was in a frenzy. The portrayal of this incestuous coupling brings us close to the essence of Wagnerism: the enthusiastic embracing of the unspeakable. This is music that appeals not to the brain's higher centers, but to its core of instinct.

Although we normally associate Plácido Domingo with the Italian repertory, he is an accomplished Wagnerian. As Siegmund, Mr. Domingo was a spectacular match for Deborah Voigt's lyric Sieglinde, his "Walse! wo ist dein Schwert" ("Volsa, where is thy sword?") ringing out even over a powerfully sounding orchestral background.

In Act Two, Wotan's unorthodox methods for creating a hero are not uniformly popular. Hunding is in furious pursuit of the lovers, and Fricka squarely supports him. Wotan bitterly agrees not to intervene and pours out his sorry tale to Brunhilde, his Valkyrie daughter. Mr. Morris and Hildegarde Behrens, as Brunhilde, were extremely well matched, and filled the confes-

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sional episode with a fine sense of foreboding.

The most touching part of this quiet act is the confrontation between Brunhilde and the doomed Siegmund. The solemnity and repressed joy of Brunhilde's description of Paradise, and Siegmund's acceptance of impending death are powerful enough, but the effect was made infinitely more moving by James Levine's pacing of the music, his creation of a tonal sense that when instruments were not playing, they were listening with rapt attention to each other, just waiting for the perfect moment to speak. Similarly touching is the conclusion of Act Three with its emotional parting of Wotan from his disobedient, Lucifer-like daughter. The Learish effect of Wotan's last words before the onset of the Fire Music, particularly his "If I must lose you whom I loved, laughing joy of my eyes," was unbearably poignant. James Morris's singing conveyed Woton's internal suffering even as he condemned Brunhilde. Though Siegmund is dead and Brunhilde is in suspended animation in the ring of fire, all is not lost. Once *was* enough for Sieglinde, who conceived and bore Siegfried.

Siegfried is a long work that vocally taxed Wolfgang Schmidt in the title role. It must also be said that Hildegarde Behrens was not in particularly strong form—perhaps because she was still recovering from the effects of the allergic attack she suffered three days previously. The opera's depiction of the killing of Fafner is eternally problematic. The death is not supposed to be comic, but this is one scene in which Wagner's implausiblities get the better of him. Nevertheless, the opera quickly recovers in the remarkable awakening of Brunhilde and her love duet. The acting in the final scene was a little rough, though. Brunhilde and Siegfried, about to indulge in *The Ring*'s second incestuous coupling, stalk each other like sumo wrestlers.

Even Wagnerophobes find *Götterdämmerung* a compelling work. A cosmic version of truth-or-consequences, *Götterdämmerung* records the outcome of a number of betrayals: Brunhilde by Siegfried, Gunther by Hagen, Siegfried by Brunhilde, Siegfried by Hagen and Gunther, and finally, of course, the gods by Wotan himself. In this performance, the full talents of the Met orchestra were abundantly displayed. James Levine unfolded the work with a pace and majesty that, for all of its five-plus hours, had one deeply regretting the passing of the last minutes. Act Two, with its shocking, desolate beginning when Alberich comes to his son Hagen in a dream, was particularly memorable, as was the stately emergence of the complexities of treachery during the wedding scene. In Act Three, Siegfried is killed while on a boar hunt, a result all the more tragic because of its commonplace banality. The final half-hour of *Götterdämmerung* washes everything away that came before it. Orchestra and soloists, particularly Miss Behrens and Matti Salminen as Hagen, were as good as we are ever likely to hear.

The central motive of *The Ring* is the pursuit of power by Wotan and the pursuit of revenge by Alberich. Dramatically, the work has fundamentally disheartening elements: love always falls prey to greed and anger. Wotan is neither godly nor noble and Alberich is the very picture of spite. Other male characters are equally flawed: Siegmund is randy and confused, Siegfried is a swaggering braggart, Mime and Hagen are scheming killers, Loge is amoral and cynical, and Fafner and Fasolt are just plain dumb. Wagner's female characters are more sympathetically portrayed, but even then Sieglinde and Brunhilde commit incest, Fricka is a termagant, Erda and the Norns are nags, the Rhinemaidens fatally indiscreet, the other Valkyries spineless, and Gutrude steals someone's husband. Wagner's glorious music, however, is the element that transforms the drama from a depressing display of foibles to a parable of our own lives and experience. "The definition of beauty is easy," wrote Paul Valéry, "it is that which makes us despair."

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The media

Pictures from the "Newseum"

by James Bowman

It seemed one of God's little jokes when the recent outpouring of tributes inspired by the deaths of the old-time newspapermen Herb Caen, Mike Royko, and Murray Kempton coincided so nearly with the opening of something called the "Newseum" across the street from the headquarters of *USA Today* in Arlington, Virginia. It was built, at a cost of fifty million dollars, by the Gannett-sponsored Freedom Forum and bears all the hallmarks of contemporary museum design—that is to say, a minimalist use of space, heavy emphasis on video and electronic gadgetry (children can make a tape of themselves pretending to be TV newsmen), and a well-stocked souvenir shop specializing in caps and T-shirts—one with the slogan: "Trust me. I'm a reporter."

Luckily, God spared one of Caen's and Royko's few remaining colleagues among old-fashioned, city-beat columnists to speak for them on the subject of the museum of journalism. "It sounds absolutely sickening," Jimmy Breslin told Henry Allen of *The Washington Post*. "I don't want any museums . . . You're supposed to be scruffy and despised. You're not supposed to be honored." Paradoxically, however, being postmodern seems to mean that the more scruffy and despised you are the more honored you will be (just as, the more honored you were the more scruffy and despised you now appear).

Allen himself comments that he liked the "Newseum" in spite of himself. "I like all the noisy multi-screen wraparound 1960s Marshall McLuhan cinerama global-village mosaic idealism. It probably makes me feel nostalgic—perfect for the Newseum, which wants to look avant-garde while being safe, safe, safe." This, however, is a false distinction. The avant-garde today *is* safe, safe, safe. And the "Newseum" and its creators are in the very avantest of it—along with the likes of Madonna, who is quoted in the museum's introductory video on "What is News?" as saying that "freedom of speech is better than sex."

Paradoxical, too, is the fact that, the more journalists are celebrated as media heroes, the less there seems to be for them to do as journalists. Richard Harwood's column, "So Much for the Scoop," in *The Washington Post* of April 7 seemed a Fukuyama-like announcement of the End of Journalism. Others, including Michael Wines of *The New York Times* and Stephen Chapman of *The Chicago Tribune*, have also begun to notice the End of News. A month after Harwood first raised the issue, his colleague Howard Kurtz wrote that "there's a whole lot of journalistic moaning these days about the lack of news."

To Kurtz as to others this phenomenon, insofar as it is not merely grousing about a slow news period, is a concomitant of changing technology.

> At the heart of this debate is the reality that newspapers and the evening TV newscast were

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> outpaced long ago by faster media outlets. Since their "news" is now outdated, they are struggling for a new definition, one that encompasses the sorts of subjects—health and consumer news, crime, celebrity gossip—that engage ordinary folks. . . .
>
> Whether the news vacuum is real or just the fevered creation of old-news dinosaurs, daily journalism needs to find a way to fill the gap. At least until the next earthquake/riot/political scandal comes to the rescue.

Harwood, in a subsequent column, also noticed that "the papers are heavily into informational services, offering self-help and how-to stories and stories about how to make money. Advice on best buys, best schools, best movies, best places to eat are [*sic*] aimed at making consumption pleasurable and efficient in a land of diverse social and economic niches." He goes so far as to say that "these substitutes for 'news' fill up most of today's newspapers, especially in the big Sunday papers." He doesn't mention the extent to which they also fill the network news broadcasts, especially NBC's "Nightly News," which was the subject of a stinging analysis by Andie Tucher in the May/June *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Not entirely unrelated to technological change, however, is a changed corporate culture. Iver Peterson reported in *The New York Times* of April 14 on a panel discussion at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington on the subject: "Are We Editors Any More? Seeking Re-Enchantment." Peterson quoted one of the panelists, Edward W. Jones, managing editor of the Fredericksburg (Virginia) *Free Lance-Star* as saying that "Five or 10 years ago, your focus could be pretty much solely on content, and the question always was, 'Is this a good story?' Now I have to think, 'Is this a story that will connect with my readers' particular life styles?' That's marketing, and it's something I never had to think about before." A dissenting voice came from Arnold H. Garson, publisher of the Sioux Falls (South Dakota) *Argus Leader*, who said that "marketing goes back to the roots of daily newspapering. Maybe it was never discussed as such, but that was what we were doing every time we made up the front page."

Harwood's original column had (perhaps unintentionally) made a similar point when it quoted Harwood's boss, the *Post*'s executive editor, Leonard Downie, on his, Downie's, editorial preoccupations, as conveyed in a "communication" to the American Society of Newspaper Editors:

> How to find, hire, and manage the best people. How to increase and utilize real diversity in our newsrooms. How to increase the depth, authority and relevance of our reporting, the power and readability of our writing, the storytelling impact of our photography and graphics. How to cooperate with circulation and advertising departments on new features and sections while maintaining editorial integrity. How to evaluate and cope with industry fads like public journalism and new-age newsroom reorganizations. How to integrate the printed newspaper with Internet sites. How to decide tough ethical questions and handle legal threats. How to enable our staffs and ourselves to enjoy our unique profession.

Nothing here about "how to find and write good stories" you notice (still less about how to avoid using words like "utilize" and "unique"). Instead, Downie's principal journalistic interest appears to be *how to be a journalist*. Such self-absorption is presumably not only the result of the "impact" on the news business of TV and other outlets (including the Internet, of course) for fast-breaking stories, but also because of the monopoly position of nearly every big-city paper in the country. Why should they worry about making sure readers get what they want when the readers have no place else to go?

As William Powers wrote recently in *The New Republic*, "to read a metropolitan newspaper—take your pick of the quality dailies—is to encounter utter spiritual dead-

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ness." To Powers the principal culprit is neither technological change nor corporatism but the decline of old-fashioned community. He quotes from a tribute to Caen that appeared in *Salon*, an on-line magazine staffed mainly by San Franciscans, and then writes that it was as if "new media was planting its lips on the corpse of old media, wistfully—and hopefully, as if to catch the elusive spirit before it vanishes for good."

> As Herb Caen showed, the most successful newspaper writing was not high-level intellectual discourse, but basic stuff: people came to a newspaper to find out if the big murder was solved, whether the new restaurant on Maple Street was any good, and what good gossip that funny columnist had come up with now. It didn't matter whether you felt you had tastes or ideas like those of the editors or the other readers of the paper, because in a sense you had everything in common: the town or city where you lived. A newspaper wasn't a club you wanted to join, it was an expression of a club you were already in.
>
> Virtual communities are another matter. Since they cannot be based in physical togetherness, they are based in other kinds of togetherness. They are communities of ideas and attitudes. And the enduring challenge with such communities (of which *The New Republic* is one) is that you have to keep convincing people that they want to belong—because they share your ideas, your slant, your sensibility. The audience's commitment to a virtual community is more elusive, harder to gain and harder to keep, than a city-dweller's commitment to the physical space in which he dwells.

This strikes me as well said, but its diagnosis leaves out of account the very nature of the contemporary news media as it is revealed to us by the "Newseum" (whose name I cannot bring myself to write without quotation marks). The executive director of this institution is Peter S. Prichard, previously the editor of *USA Today*. He says that the purpose of the place is to help ordinary people "understand" media people—"who we are and what we do and how and why we do it. We hope our visitors will come away with a better feel for the business, and a deeper appreciation of the importance of the First Amendment." But its real purpose is to celebrate and perpetuate the new mythology of "Journalism"—another word which, increasingly, needs a typographical *cordon sanitaire* if it is not to corrupt one's use of honest English.

Two things about the "Newseum" leap out instantly at you. The first is that the triumphalist history that it celebrates is almost indistinguishable from the history of the United States of America. There are a few nods to pre-Columbian forms of news-gathering and reporting, but even most of those seem to owe more to their "diversity" (e.g., a buffalo-skin rug used by "native Americans" to send smoke signals) than to their journalistic significance. The "News History Wall" begins its chronicle about 1600 and devotes most of its account of the years up until the Civil War to exhibits related either to the colonists' rebellion against British rule or attempts at censorship or both.

The second thing you notice is that the American history which is being recounted is the received standard media version, which goes something like this. The world pretty much begins, like the News History Wall, in 1600. Before that there were innocent yet highly sophisticated Indian societies; after that came colonists and slaves. At first, colonists, slaves, and Indians were alike the victims of British imperialism and colonialism, but after the glorious victory of the American War of Independence, the colonists became the new oppressors of the slaves and the Indians. The story of the early nineteenth century is of brave abolitionist newspapers pioneering what should have been a new birth of freedom after the Civil War freed the slaves. Instead, following that shining moment, there were eighty years of renewed darkness dominated by violent white men who got rich and made

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wars; lynched, exploited, and imposed Jim Crow laws on the emancipated slaves; killed native Americans and stole their land; and raped the environment. The one bright spot in the gloom was the success of the women's suffrage movement.

It was only, really, with the Second World War's noble crusade against "fascism" and the Holocaust that real human progress began. Its highlights were school desegregation, McCarthyism (a reactionary salient beaten back more or less single-handedly by Edward R. Murrow), Elvis and the beginnings of rock 'n' roll, the Nixon-Kennedy debates and the election of JFK, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, the assassination of JFK, the thirty-minute evening news broadcast in color, the Vietnam War on the evening news and the anti-war movement, youth culture and the liberation of America's young people and journalists (best of all, of course, was if you were a young journalist), the moon landing, the women's movement, homosexual liberation, and, finally, Watergate.

That is the central event in history, the sort of thing—like the first Olympiad, the founding of Rome, the birth of Christ, and the Hegira of Mohammed—by which time itself is measured. It is commemorated as the greatest victory of all for the progressives—their Saratoga and Yorktown, their Trafalgar and Waterloo, their Gettysburg and Appomattox—yet at that point historical progress pretty much stops. Carter, Reagan, Bush—all are historically insignificant. The central historical events since 1974 have been the evacuation of Saigon, the assassination of John Lennon, the Challenger disaster, the tank that stopped for a moment on its way to crushing the Tiananmen Square uprising when a student held up his hand, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Peter Arnett's reporting of the Gulf War for CNN and, finally, the release of Nelson Mandela and his subsequent election as president of South Africa.

The last at least suggests that the yearnings to breathe free of American journalists have communicated themselves to foreigners and given new hope to the world, but the general sense of the last quarter-century has been of a long and lonely struggle against the forces of reaction which would return to the benighted ways of the past—which is to say to "fascism," censorship, and the oppression and murder of journalists. And as both a melancholy reminder of this threat and a tribute to the dead heroes, there stands outside in "Freedom Park" a Journalists' Memorial recording the names of all those (or all those that the Freedom Forum people knew about) who have given their lives in the cause of reporting the news.

The first name is that of James M. Lingan of the (Maryland) *Federal Republican* who died in 1812. After that there was a blissful quarter-century in which no journalists were killed. The first non-American journalist (Thomas William Bowlby of *The Times* of London) didn't die until 1860. The first umpteen millennia of human history, up until 1900, are covered by only three panels. But with the present century, and especially the post-Cold War era, the pace begins to pick up. There are four and a half panels devoted to journalist victims of the Second World War, but twenty-three are required to cover the period from 1989 to 1996.

The impression created is of a recent escalation of an ancient war against journalists by—but by whom? Some of these heroes were killed because they sought to know things that others wanted to keep private, some because their writings angered powerful people, some because they were merely caught in the crossfire of a real war. Very few, I venture, had any idea of being martyrs for the noble cause of increased access to information; even fewer of those who killed them would have identified themselves as being in any general way partisans of the restricted-information faction. Yet, in the media version of history, all the petty squabbles of the past that we used to read about in the history books begin to pale beside this long and glorious, if

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hitherto only implicit, struggle for the basic human right of everybody to know everything.

At one level this is merely comic, like the fatuous political opinions on display in Walter Cronkite's new book, *A Reporter's Life*. "I had trouble with his political philosophy," writes the philosophical Mr. Cronkite of Ronald Reagan—a man whose "affability" he praises. What, in particular, he "had trouble" with was "his endorsement of laissez-faire trickle-down economics, the concept that if the people and industries at the top are successful, prosperity will somehow be visited on all the rest of us." Nowhere is it hinted that this is not real but only journalistic (and, of course, partisan) "economics" and "political philosophy." Yet Cronkite, along with Edward R. Murrow, JFK, Martin Luther King, and John Lennon, is one of the heroes celebrated by the "Newseum." I especially liked Cronkite's authoritative answer to the question "Is TV really superficial?" asked by the News History Wall. "Many believe TV only skims the surface of news. Even top anchor Walter Cronkite advises viewers to read a newspaper."

Thank goodness we can still save ourselves from superficiality with newspapers! Gannett's own *USA Today* is doing all it can to help. But I fear we are fighting a losing battle. For a depressingly large proportion of the hordes of schoolchildren who will be marched by their teachers through the "Newseum," this is the only version of history they will ever encounter. Henry Allen is right to feel "nervous" about the place's celebration of the fact that "something important is going on inside newsrooms" since "the news business is founded on the principle that something far more important is always going on outside newsrooms—reality, the world, everything, anything." But nowadays the most frightening and newsworthy reality of all is what is going on inside the newsrooms—namely the remanufacture of our national mythology according to media specifications. Perhaps our only hope is that, as the media move on from supplying "the first rough draft of history" to history itself, we shall all become even more bored with them than we are already and finally put the news business out of business.

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Verse chronicle

Hardscrabble country

by William Logan

Charles Wright's poetry is the last refuge of nineteenth-century oratory—his overwrought syntax is its own religion. In early books he tried on various styles like a man changing hats. He never made any of the hats his own, and the hats never made him their own, either—they were just hats. For the past decade, as middle age has become mortal, his poems have settled into loose, baggy journals heavily influenced by Ezra Pound. The sea-chop of rhythm, the epigrammatic line, the snatch of foreign language—all are the lost property of a great flawed poet.

> Through language, strict attention—
> *Verona mi fe', disfecemi Verona*, the song goes.
> I've hummed it, I've bridged the break
>
> To no avail.
> April. The year begins beyond words,
> Beyond myself and the image of myself, beyond
> Moon's ice and summer's thunder. All that.

The style seems less an homage than a way of avoiding argument.

Black Zodiac[1] opens with an "Apologia pro vita sua"—it's not often a poet is drawn to Cardinal Newman these days. If there's a religious crisis here, it is beyond the reach of style. The poems are usually arranged in short, unattached sections with only the most distracted relation to one another; they stop and start, and get mired in metaphysics. When a poet sinks into his attitudes, mortal thoughts are near; and if he writes, "Time is the source of all good,/ time the engenderer/ Of entropy and decay,/ Time the destroyer, our only-begetter and advocate," you know Eliot and Anglo-Catholicism hover in the background.

Wright threatens to open a minimart of metaphysics. His poems are full of vague notions and vaguer discontents. It's not that I'm deaf to metaphysics; it's that these conundrums were old a century ago—the poets they were alive for are the dust of our anthologies. None of them would have let his metaphysics be muddled with Wright's country sentiment and aw-shucks naïveté: "If God hurt the way we hurt,/ he, too, would be heart-sore,"; "Can we address a blade of grass, the immensity of a snowflake?"; "The meat of the sacrament is invisible meat and a ghostly substance./ I'll say." If this is innocence, give me experience any day.

It's not clear whether the religious vocabulary reaches for redemption or recognizes that in our secular age even the language of religion has been soiled. The religious overlay isn't particularly convincing—when Wright composes his "Lives of the Saints," the saints seem to be poets, a romantic and self-pitying idea if ever there was

1 *Black Zodiac*, by Charles Wright; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 85 pages, $19.

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one. He has written with bitter fondness of childhood in hardscrabble country (poets of small towns always recall life as a little hardscrabble), but the religion here doesn't rise from clapboard churches and the mysticism of Southern childhood. It has the scent of Gothic cathedrals and poetry anthologies.

Wright is one of the best poets of his generation, the generation born after Black Friday and before the end of World War II. Few poets this good write so pointlessly, but line by line he is a master of gorgeous effects. In a haze of vacant meditation, he has not lost his eye for the natural world:

> Nothing is flat-lit and tabula rasaed in
> Charlottesville,
> Umbrian sackcloth,
> stigmata and *Stabat mater*,
> A sleep and a death away,
> Night, and a sleep and a death away—
> Light's frost-fired and Byzantine here,
> aureate, beehived,
> Falling in Heraclitean streams
> Through my neighbor's maple trees.

Umbria and the stigmata and Byzantium and Heraclitus aren't really necessary (living in Charlottesville must be a lot more interesting than I'd suspected), but Wright bothers to see the world—or to imagine it, which is almost better. If his nature is always vivid in the same way, the "Sky white as raw silk" and the "Willows, medusa-hooded and bone-browed" are the small affairs of spirit his Chinese-sage ventures never approach. A poet who can write "A little wind/ whiffles across the back yard like a squall line" and dozens of other lines as redolent and restless ought to be writing poems, not notes for notes for poems. The sketchy descriptions are lovely, but they're lazy. You could churn out such stuff every day (in *Zone Journals* [1988], Wright did exactly that), and it would cost you nothing.

It's hard to care about poems so resolute in their absences, so deft in their mean evasions. Wright seems to make evasion a moral principle, as if it were the only way to capture the transitory. (If Eliot's Hollow Men wrote poetry, it would be poetry like this.) These poems are like paintings by Seurat. You back away from the colorful clots and a ghostly image appears, but the image is still made of dots. It's a tale by Henry James—Wright has worked a life to perfect a way to say the important thing, only to find he has nothing to say.

Michael Lind's *The Alamo*[2] isn't as awful as you'd think--not nearly as awful as it might have been. This six-thousand-line epic in rhyme royal is one of those silly ideas that possesses young poets, or used to—there haven't been this many bad rhymed stanzas since Vikram Seth's *Golden Gate*. Lind, the defector from conservative political commentary (author of *The Next American Nation* and *Up from Conservatism*), has done his research and had the historian's nightmare —so many anecdotes, so little space. His epic is stuffed with names if not faces, and every defender of the Alamo gets at least a line for his tombstone.

Americans revel in their old defeats: the Alamo, Pearl Harbor, and Custer's Last Stand are commemorated in the national memory more warmly, and more brazenly, than the victories that followed. Given less of a sweet tooth for nobility and martial valor (the poem is dedicated "to the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States of America and their families"), Lind might have done for William Travis and his men what Evan S. Connell did for Custer. A minutely detailed account of the battle could dispel the myths more brutally than these jingling stanzas.

Lind has a gift for the arresting phrase: his metaphors and epic similes have a sharpness and élan missing in contemporary poetry. When Sam Houston is compared to a snapping turtle; or Santa Anna's cavalry murder the wounded, "Wielding their spears as bargemen would use/ their staffs to lever flatboats"; or Mexican troops attack

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2 *The Alamo: An Epic*, by Michael Lind; Houghton Mifflin, 351 pages, $25.

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the Alamo, "adhesive coils of a colossal squid/ smothering a whale caught in its weird/ embrace," you're startled by how fresh the antique device seems. The backwoods stumpery of Houston and Crockett flaunts its cracker-barrel wit, and other speeches are drily based on classical models (Travis rouses his officers in the voice of Sarpedon speaking to Glaucus). When a woman and her children defend a fort with her underwear, or the new rebels ride across the uncovered graveyard of rebels slaughtered twenty years before, the irony could scarcely be more poker-faced.

Unfortunately, Lind's modest poetic gifts are overwhelmed by all the accidental comedy to which a minor poet is subject. His lines galumph along in pentameter, mostly without complaint (though frequently they lose a foot in battle); but his idea of storytelling comes from supermarket bodice-rippers—with a suitably lurid cover, this might have been called *Tongues of Flame*. His characters are miniature, glossy versions of their historical selves, a TV-movie waxworks of superficial action.

Lind's major negative asset is a hilarious insensitivity to tone. One hopes Travis never said, "Each petty state would be its neighbor's vampire,/ till Britain, France, or Russia played the umpire." A Mexican officer arrives, "his posture stiff, pace brisk, and aspect worried./ At his approach, gloves blizzarded and flurried." As a soldier dies, "he tasted sour cud,/ his knees went flaccid, and he slapped the mud." The images are ludicrously up to date. Santa Anna "scowls, barks, paces like a coach/ upon the sidelines in a frantic game," and later the Alamo becomes the Astrodome: "Far off, the Alamo looked like a sports/ arena, like a stadium by night,/ where scores are marked by cheering." His vocabulary is sometimes preposterously inflated ("their contumelious suzerain,/ a skewbald stallion") or his imagery comically askew ("Darst, bayoneted, left a family/ headless in Gonzales"). When children are bayoneted, "Red began to rim/ the tiny mouths like mustaches of jam." Snatches of quotation cannot quite reveal the genial blundering of the whole martial melodrama:

> Muskets flamed
> and metal swished through flesh. Moaning
> and maimed,
> Bill Blazeby, Captain of the New Orleans
> Greys,
> rolled down the cold dirt rampart in a daze;
>
> his forty-one-year journey from his home
> in England through New York and then
> the port
> of New Orleans brought him here, to soak
> the loam
> of Bexar with puddling blood.

Metal swished through flesh! Soak the loam! We are back in *Ivanhoe*. The view of battle is so cloyingly naïve and piously sentimental, you expect the dying defenders to break into "The Streets of Laredo." This version of the Alamo is fit for schoolrooms (you'd think Texas was born in a manger)—it wears its patriotism on its sleeve. Lind doesn't do everything wrong (his view of Santa Anna is remarkably evenhanded); but how, just before battle, can a poet launch into half a dozen stanzas of science fiction to suggest the Alamo is small in the scheme of things? Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie, meet "two-legged reptile warriors," "squeaking grubs," and "leopard-colored slugs."

Mary Oliver's bland, consolatory poetry is a favorite of people who don't like poetry (it's a favorite of some poets as well, but then poets often don't like poetry, either). Sometimes in *West Wind*[3] she'll write of small incidents—finding a dead snake or rescuing a field mouse—but mostly she wants to Appreciate Nature. This is just the way I am, her poems seem to say; I love nature to death, why don't you, you pitiful stay-at-home reader of poetry, you? Reading her poems is like joining a garden club where the members are part of a plant-wor-

3 *West Wind*, by Mary Oliver; Houghton Mifflin, 63 pages, $21.

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shipping cult—no wonder they feel holier than thou. When Oliver looks into her yard, she thinks of the Buddha arising. And herself? She's likely to be lifted into the air by rapture ("as though I had shaken my arms and *lo!* they were wings").

It's one thing for a poet to cultivate a wide-eyed persona capable of saying, "What can we do/ but keep on breathing in and out. . . ?" or "How can I hope to be friends/ with the hard white stars. . . ?" This is just a version of Little Me poetry that went out with bobby socks and Shirley Temples. But it's a bit much when such a poet says, "What will ambition do for me that the fox . . ./ has not already done?" Oliver has an agent and has not objected to the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. She's not spending all her spare moments working on transcendence. Usually she's writing gimcrack Whitman instead:

> Am I not among the early risers
> and the long-distance walkers?
>
> Have I not stood, amazed, as I consider
> the perfection of the morning star
> above the peaks of the houses, and the
> crowns of the trees blue in the
> first light? . . .
>
> Above the modest house and the palace—
> the same darkness.
> Above the evil man and the just,
> the same stars.
> Above the child who will recover and
> the child who will not recover,
> the same energies roll forward,
> from one tragedy to the next and from one
> foolishness to the next.
>
> I bow down.

I bow down! There's the humble self-dramatizing touch. Whitman was gimcrack, too, but we forgive him because he was a genius of gimcrack.

Oliver's head is filled with such good-natured mush. You'd love to have her for a next-door neighbor, though you'd worry that she spends too much time in the yard, looking up at the sky. She loves nature (out by her trees she pulls up a pew), but she loves gushing about nature even more: "How the sky flares and grows brighter, all the time!/ How time extends!," "I would touch the faces of the daisies,/ and I would bow down/ to think about it," "Snowflakes, coasting into the winter woods, making a very small sound, like this/ sooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo. . . ." I begin to long for some sign of six millennia of culture—a fork, say, or a cell phone.

Her poetry is allergic to the interesting word. It's almost always "cold, black fields" or "white skull" or "pure, deep darkness," poetry stripped to its elements, but also stripped of its distinctiveness. When she writes of some black oaks, "I'm pale with longing for their thick bodies ruckled with lichen," you almost fall over in shock. Perhaps we need plain language and plain sentiment for plain times, but such poetry has all the defects of prose (how Shelley would cringe at what Shelleyesque has become) and none of the virtues of poetry. A poetry so limited in its means and devastated in its imaginings is also deadened to its responsibilities—it's as if poetry meant nothing but a few gestures toward the sentiment of meaning. A Baroque revival must be just around the corner.

Of course no poet means to be dishonest in her responses; but sometimes language itself is a dishonesty, its responses hardened to cliché. Clichés aren't a neural form of truth; they're truth frozen into fraud.

When he was a young man, Ezra Pound scribbled a sonnet every morning before breakfast. He had the good sense to throw the whole lot in the fire. A poet doesn't have to believe the Muse keeps appointments to see the virtues of regimen; and yet there's something pillowy and *fin de siècle* in Robert Bly's self-imposed discipline, to write a poem every morning before rising. *Morning Poems*[4] has a dozy complacency (you feel some of it was written before waking). The

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book is composed in simple, declarative sentences, full of "wisdom" and "sentiment," as if these were ingredients found in any supermarket; and like a Disney cartoon they're full of talking mice, talking cars, talking cats, talking trees. The poems peter out at sonnet length, the appetite for poetry exhausted where the appetite for breakfast begins.

> One day a mouse called to me from his curly nest:
> "How do you sleep? I love curliness."
>
> "Well, I like to be stretched out. I like my bones to be
> All lined up. I like to see my toes way off over there."
>
> "I suppose that's one way," the mouse said, "but I don't like it.
> The planets don't act that way, nor the Milky Way."
>
> What could I say? You know you're near the end
> Of the century when a sleepy mouse brings in the Milky Way.

This could hardly be more winsome or sickeningly ingenuous. After a few such trifles, just Aesop without his dentures (I'm especially fond of the talking wheat), a reader might feel he had wandered into a children's book by mistake.

In their dotage, poets often go from rage to reason: angry young men rarely become angry old ones. An odd peaceableness falls over them, like a comforter, when they draw Social Security (even Pound grew sorry as a pumpkin and shriveled into silence). Bly was once a critic of captious temper, a scourge of bad poetry who would have howled at the portentous hush of poems here ("The angels were certain. But we could not/ Be certain whether our family was worthy tonight").

Since his days as a devoted *imagiste*, Bly has become the spokesman for New Age manliness; and whenever you hear of men running through the woods half-naked, beating on drums and declaring their manhood, you know he is partly to blame (the author of *Iron John* collects a royalty on every drumbeat). Yet something of that earlier poet survives, the poet who wrote reams of antiwar poems, most of them awful, but a few the only lasting poetry to come out of Vietnam.

> "The Russians had few doctors on the front line.
> My father's job was this: after the battle
> Was over, he'd walk among the men hit,
> Sit down and ask: 'Would you like to die on your
> Own in a few hours, or should I finish it?'
> Most said, 'Don't leave me.' The two would have
> A cigarette. He'd take out his small notebook—
> We had no dogtags, you know—and write the man's
> Name down, his wife's, his children, his address, and what
> He wanted to say. When the cigarette was done,
> The soldier would turn his head to the side. My father
> Finished off four hundred men that way during the war.
> He never went crazy. They were his people."

This has the war correspondent's merciless eye, and it's surprising that Bly's mercy elsewhere is just a method of sweet-talking the reader. The sugary seductiveness and mythopoeic posturing spoil poems with Auden's sense of destiny's accident and fate's misadventure: "the wind blows an ash/ Into the anarchist's eye, and he pulls/ The trigger too soon, and kills the King instead of/ The fat factory owner, and then/ A lot of men get on motorcycles." When wryness softens into whimsy, we're left with lines like "Some people inside my body last night/ Married

4 *Morning Poems*, by Robert Bly; HarperCollins, 109 pages, $23.

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each other just in order to dance" or "He knew the moon was made of clogged magma,/ And volcanic rinsings, and punk and dog poop."

The immanence of nature, the presence of the soul, the farmboy's earned experience come in for hard salesmanship here. When a poet wants to sell you something, you think you're listening to some yarn by a genial man on your doorstep, but soon you own forty acres of Florida swamp.

You can see why the British love Les Murray. He fulfills every British cliché about Australians—rough-mannered, Ur-Other rubes in the wilderness, the bastard progeny of jailer and jailed, they're the Empire's loyal second-raters. The Australian identity is one of Murray's favorite subjects. He's no joiner, and loathes people who are—gritty, doomed independence is another Australian cliché.

It's too easy to take Murray on his own outsize terms, a great shambling presence presiding over poetry down under (outsize in poetry as well as person—he makes much of being fat). The poetry in *Subhuman Redneck Poems*[5] ranges from oafish social commentary to reminiscences dark with pathos, from simple descriptions of Fabergé-like intensity to gouts of feckless imagery. He can hardly get through a poem without disaster, and part of reading him is waiting for the disaster to happen—the pleasure isn't *Schadenfreude*, it's suspense.

Murray catches the oddity of nature like a blowsy reincarnation of Marianne Moore: "cormorants with musket-hammer necks, plus/ the clinician spoonbill, its long pout;// twilight's herons who were almost too lightfoot/ to land; pearl galahs in pink-fronted/ confederacy." Though he loves to jackhammer his images, he can have the delicate touch of an archeologist:

> The impress of a whelk
> in hard brown rock,
>
> fluted as a plinth.
> Its life gone utterly,
>
> throb, wet and chalk,
> left this shape-transmission,
>
> a kin boat of fine brick.
> Just off centre is a chip
>
> healed before its death.

This is a series of balanced lines, each just two or three elements in tension; the reader has to read again to be sure that *throb* is a noun, not a verb. The intelligence of such tension gets into last lines like "For all the death, we also die unrehearsed" or "Beyond choice, we see our loves as indigenes see land," which take poems out of their small rooms and put them in larger ones.

Murray has the scope and restless bearing of Auden—he's not afraid of subject, and will tackle any old thing: a hot-air balloon tragedy, Midas given the gift of metaphor, swearing, a retired lighthouse keeper, a genealogical chart as big as the galaxy, a mall inside Ayers Rock, the suburbs as a tale out of Kafka. His poems about an autistic child and a burned child are full of tenderness, without making the reader regret the sympathies of tenderness—the poems do not ask for the compassion they evoke.

There are other poets in Murray, almost all bad ones. Whole poems collapse in a jumble of messy, ungoverned images. He writes of the poor:

> Destitution's an antique. The huge-headed
> are sad chaff blown by military bohemians.
> Their thin metal bowls are filled or not
>
> from the sky by deodorised descendants
> of a tart-tongued womb-noticing noblesse
> in the goffered hair-puddings of God's law
>
> who pumped pioneer bouillons with a potstick,
> or of dazzled human muesli poured from ships
> under the milk of smoke and decades.

I can make sense of this, more or less (the

5 *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, by Les Murray; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 104 pages, $18.

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editorializing is pretty thin), but by the time I get to "human muesli" it hardly seems worth the effort. I find myself rooting for Murray to make his clumsiness a virtue, though it almost never is. If poetry were a primal force, such plenitude would make him an Australian primitive (in poetry, alas, plenitude is a greater vice than parsimony). At times it's hard to tell, especially when he's rhyming, whether Murray's just playing dumb:

> We are the Australians. Our history is short.
> This makes pastry chefs snotty and racehorses snort.
> It makes pride a blood poppy and work an export
> and bars our trained minds from original thought. . . .

You could excuse this in any number of ways—satire is a coiled, venomous form, sometimes turning on form. But the rhymes are just as dreadful elsewhere. The subject is schools:

> Where humans can't leave and mustn't complain
> there some will emerge who enjoy giving pain.
>
> Snide universal testing leads them to each one
> who will shrivel reliably, whom the rest will then shun.
>
> Some who might have been chosen, and natural police,
> do routine hurt, the catcalling, the giving no peace. . . .

This seems badly translated out of Old Church Slavonic with only a Russian phrase book at hand. Poets of such intelligence can seldom be quoted so plainly against themselves. The loutishness may be calculated; but the more you allow contempt to prove your independence from poetic tradition, the less free you are to invoke that tradition when it suits you. Only by incorporating the unpoetic can the poetic move forward, but bad poetry is no defense against rejection (least of all a revenge for schoolyard rejection). Poetry can give up many things, but when it loses the reader's trust it becomes hostage to its vices.

Not all American poets stopped writing formal poetry after *Life Studies*, though sometimes it seems they did. The second free-verse revolution was more radical than the first, and for decades afterwards rhyme and pentameter were as old-fashioned as a whale-bone corset. Edgar Bowers was a Fifties formalist, the best of the coterie surrounding Yvor Winters (himself still an underrated poet). Bowers's early books, *The Form of Loss* (1956) and *The Astronomers* (1965), were ignored for flashier talents like Wilbur and Merrill and darker ones like Hecht. *Living Together: New and Selected Poems* (1973) added half a dozen poems, but no new book appeared until *For Louis Pasteur* (1990). There was always something fussy and out of date about Bowers—even when pentameter was the fashion his was stuffy and genteel. The ten poems and a long sequence called "Mazes" new to *Collected Poems*[6] show the style not changed but amplified. Bowers has remained a Fifties poet, but now that seems a refreshing thing.

Bowers's lines have a weight, a capaciousness, even a resolve not many poets would attempt anymore. It's a pleasure to watch enjambment, the slow elaboration of perception through syntax, so artfully deployed (most poets use a hacksaw rather than a scalpel). His stiltedness has a wary subtlety, the mind moving, as if with armed guards, between the range of its particulars and the ruin of its abstractions. Poets rarely give such serious attention to the form of perception.

> When Reichenbach treks with Stanley, his white ears
> Are tom-tom, labyrinths of chant, dark speech,
> Bull elephants, and lions at night; his eyes

6 *Collected Poems*, by Edgar Bowers; Alfred A. Knopf, 168 pages, $25.

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Green branch, black feather, antelope thick
as dust,
Hyenas at bloody offal thieved from lions;
His skin the fly, the thing that crawls. . . .

The dense and weedy phrases, unusual in a poet at ease with extinction, crowd the jungle of these lines. Imagery is often the narrative of a syntax, and few poets are as alert to the river-turnings and oxbows a sentence offers up.

His quiet manner hides a fatalistic humor. In "The Poet Orders His Tomb," the tomb is decorated with a nightmarish menagerie:

Dogs in the frozen haloes of their barks,
A hundred porous arks
Aground and lost, where elephants like quarks
Ape mother mules or imitation sharks—

And each of them half-venerated by
A mob, impartially
Scaled, finned, or feathered, all before a dry
Unable mouth, symmetrically awry.

This is a little like Michelangelo working his own flayed skin into his painting of the Last Judgment. Even Bowers's best poems, unfortunately, come with defects intimate in the style: phrases stiff-jointed or trite, musty Latin polysyllables, a clutch of Miltonic inversions (*They moped back severe*! *Books cosmic*!). Without their defects poets often lose their graces—sometimes their defects allow those graces. That does not make the defects less irritating.

Bowers has a gift for writing poems withdrawn and a little shy of statement. Many are portraits of young male friends, some just glances out the window. He's never lost a Fifties taste for the Greek gods—they elbow their way in even when they're not wanted. At a poetry reading in California, the gods rise within the voice of a minor poet; and soon the fatal arrow is aimed at Achilles. I've been to many poetry readings and never seen that.

The god that haunts Bowers is the god of war. His speaker meets a German general on his sickbed:

I thought I saw
For him the summer uniforms in snow,
Partisans, savage reprisals, day-long strafing,
Long lines of prisoners never to return,
Comrades armless, legless, and blind. But he,
Clutching my sleeve to pull me closer,
whispered,
"It was the SS did it, not my men.
The week before the armistice, they took
Three just-conscripted boys who were afraid
And hanged them, German children, the sky
green
Above the uniforms too big for them,
As we saw when we found and cut them
down.
It was then that I despaired to live or die."

The Hanged Man appears twice in these poems, like something out of Madame Sosostris's tarot pack; but the images of war provoke Bowers to passions hidden and unresolved in a life devoted to the cozy truces of academia. In half a dozen poems, in "Clear-seeing," "Clothes" (the splendid ending is a view of a mountain, "its double peaks the victory sign"), "Two Poems on the Catholic Bavarians," "The Prince," and "Aix-la-Chapelle, 1945," the passions of war, and the smudged line between victor and victim, suggest in suffering and sacrifice the Passion of Christ. The late poems of moral existence complete the work of half a century before.

Much of the poetry forgotten in the sea-change that followed *Life Studies* was written by poets who were stiffer versions of Auden, less flexible in intellect, less twisted by irony (followers are not more or less; they're always less)—what Pound would have called the bureaucracy organized around genius. At this distance their elaborations look more like an achievement; and it may be the moment, when we are about to have a Lowell revival, to look at the discarded early work of Karl Shapiro, Louis Simpson, Philip Levine, and other poets who came to grief in free verse. Edgar Bowers shows how much could have been accomplished, in a quiet, unassuming way, by keeping the faith.

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Books

The Gospel of Norman

by Brooke Allen

Norman Mailer has spent a lifetime looking for attention. At some point he must have decided that if he couldn't get enough of it through his literary efforts, then he might succeed with exhibitionistic behavior. Hence the famous belligerence, the hubris, and the *enfant terrible* shenanigans, the efforts to shock and offend. But as the twentieth century draws to a close and fiction, like life, gets ever more bizarre, it is becoming almost impossible to shock or offend anymore. How, then, might an aging, slightly out-of-date novelist find his way back into the spotlight?

He must have been sure that by writing a novel about Jesus, and in the first person, he could raise a few hackles. In an interview with *The New York Times* shortly after publication of his new novel, *The Gospel According to the Son*,[1] Mailer said hopefully, "There's an irritation factor I'm presuming. The 'How dare he!' It's very much present in literary people."

Dream on. Nikos Kazantzakis, with *The Last Temptation of Christ* (and Martin Scorsese with his film version of that novel), got there first, and did indeed cause a certain amount of scandal, especially in the Catholic Church. By now, though, the idea of presenting Jesus as a fallible, even a sexual, human being is a little old hat, and Mailer's book will probably induce not outrage so much as mild amusement that the old man is up to his antics again. In publicizing his novel the author has injected just the right tone of familiar Maileresque swagger: the New Testament, he says, is full of "pretty dull prose and a contradictory, almost hopeless way of telling the story. So I thought this account, this wonderful narrative, ought to be properly told. . . . If I can write about Isis and Osiris and Ra, then certainly the New Testament is not going to be that difficult to do."

Now I may be wrong, but I think it is safe to predict that the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John will continue to be read for a good long time after the Gospel of Norman has been forgotten. Whether or not the story of Christ is, as Mailer insists, the Greatest Story Ever Told, it is certain that the New Testament contains some of the greatest prose ever written, and equally certain that the greatness of the prose has been instrumental in conserving the power and mystery of Christianity and converting many millions of souls over the centuries. "Jesus comes alive as a God with the great lines," Mailer admits, "but as a man he doesn't come alive at all." The truth is, though, that the aura of mystery around Jesus, the very fact that he is contradictory, inexplicable, and remote is perhaps the most potent aspect of the New Testament. It is because of the mystery that millions—including many non-believers—continue to be drawn to the Gospels.

1 *The Gospel According to the Son*, by Norman Mailer; Random House, 242 pages, $22.

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If it was Mailer's intent to do away with the mystery, he has certainly succeeded. In his version of Christ's inner life he portrays the Messiah as a dopey, inarticulate guy who is not too sure why God has chosen him in the first place. The real problem is not that Mailer dares too much but that he has not been bold or daring *enough* in reimagining Jesus, in putting words into his mouth or thoughts into his head. When John the Baptist is imprisoned by Herod Antipas, for instance, Jesus simply says, "So I knew that my time had come. I must leave Nazareth. I must take up a life of preaching and try to emulate what John had done." Mailer's Jesus seldom lets us any deeper into his thoughts—if, indeed, his thoughts go any deeper—than this. Later, speaking of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that the evangelists got it all wrong: "They had me saying all manner of things, and some were the opposite of others." An intriguing thought: what, if not what we have in the New Testament, did he really say? But Mailer doesn't dare rise to his own challenge: in his version of the Sermon, all of Jesus' words come straight from Matthew, the "great lines" hopelessly overpowering Mailer's feeble prose.

Mailer's Jesus begins his story by explaining why he has chosen to write his own Gospel, straight from the horse's mouth, as it were. "While I would not say that Mark's gospel is false, it has much exaggeration. And I would offer less for Matthew, and for Luke and John, who gave me words I never uttered and described me as gentle when I was pale with rage." It is perfectly true, of course, that the evangelists were following their own agenda, which was to gain new adherents to the Christian faith; where that agenda diverged from historical memory they had no compunction about altering the events. Extensive research on the historical Jesus has revealed countless fascinating alternatives to the "facts" of his life that have accrued over two millenia.

If Mailer had been willing to invest any significant time, imagination, or effort, he might have written a genuinely interesting—and genuinely provocative—novel, exploiting such possibilities. Instead, he has chosen to give us a mishmash of the four Gospels, with few surprises and very few radical departures from orthodoxy, except for predictable stuff like Jesus' loins quickening as he suffers the ravages of lust, or some such Lawrentian gobbledygook. Mailer's Jesus is born in Bethlehem, in a manger. An angel attends his birth and proclaims him the son of God. Joseph is a carpenter, and Jesus is brought up to that profession. After Joseph's death Jesus, at the age of thirty, begins his career as a holy man. He performs miracles, walks on water, and is spoken to by God. He is tempted three times by Satan. He holds a Last Supper on the Passover, and invents the Eucharist. He is betrayed by Judas, condemned by the Jews of the Temple, crucified, and resurrected. He is now in Heaven, where he sits at the right hand of God.

Not much here, in fact, to shock the pious. Though he is himself a Jew, Mailer appears to accept the evangelists' assertion—now generally agreed to have been a device to deflect Roman retaliation—that it was the Jews, and not the Romans, who insisted that Jesus be put to death. Mailer has chosen, in fact, to perpetuate a pernicious myth that has caused the Jews two millenia of persecution at Christian hands. Mailer's only radical departure from Christian tradition—possibly the book's only valid *raison d'être*—is not in his interpretation of Christ, but of God. Mailer's God is fallible, the death of his Son a defeat rather than, as it is interpreted by Christian theology, a victory. But even God, as imagined by Mailer, is faintly comical, rather like a hardworking dad reaching for the martini shaker after a tough day at the office. "I remain on the right hand of God," Jesus says. "My father, however, does not often speak to me. Nonetheless, I honor Him. Surely He sends forth as much love as He can offer, but His love is not without limit."

Mailer strives for seriousness, but the book is always funny, sometimes hilariously

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so, because of its language. Like a little child who prays to God with the words "thee" and "thou" because he thinks that's the way God talks, Mailer has chosen a phony Jacobean patter through which disconcerting echoes of New Yorkese can be heard. Of course, there is no earthly reason why Jesus and his fellows should speak in seventeenth-century English: if they are not going to speak Aramaic, which was the historical Jesus' native language, then they might just as well speak twentieth-century American, a dialect with which Mailer has shown considerable skill. Instead he has opted for a lingo that sounds like it's out of a third-rate Biblical epic, presumably because he didn't feel up to the challenge of modernizing, and probably losing the impact, of the "great lines" on which the tale depends, lines like: "Get thee behind me, Satan"; "I came not to send peace, but a sword"; or "I am the resurrection, and the life." Mailer's literary inferiority to Christ, the evangelists, and the translators of the King James Bible can be judged by almost any passage in *The Gospel According to the Son*. A couple of representative ones:

> I can also say that this conversation with Judas was wondrous for clearing disarray. At last all seemed to be in order. We were ready. I could hardly believe we were ready to set out at last for Jerusalem, but it was a good morning. If none of us were [*sic*] without fear, we were touched by happiness as well. For we had not been enslaved by our fear. Our legs knew their own joy.

Or:

> While we waited and worked to keep our spirits together, I had my times of doubt. I had labored in so many ways to reach the hearts of my fellow Jews, good men, even pillars of the community, but so many had wanted nothing to do with me.

Pillars of the community yet! Perhaps they are members of the Elks Club, too! Mailer's discomfort with the idiolect he has chosen for his hero is evident as, over and over, he slips in such Americanisms and anachronisms. My own favorite: "Yet these Pharisees were proud; from the heights of their self-esteem they offered homage to themselves."

If one didn't know better, one might think that Mailer's Jesus spent his time reading pop psychology paperbacks or relaxing in front of daytime TV. *The Gospel According to the Son* is full of topical Nineties concerns. Jesus suffers, for example, from repressed memory syndrome: though Joseph told him of his holy mission when he was a child, he says, "what I learned was so far from the understanding of a boy that soon after our return, I fell into a long fever. All that Joseph told me seemed lost. Still, I do not think it was the fever that made me forget, but rather that I did not wish to remember." When Jesus raises the daughter of Jairus, he senses that she is the victim of a dysfunctional family life: it was "a house of many unclean feelings. No air was sweet in these rooms, and those stale miseries that feed upon themselves were with us."

This Jesus is gay-friendly. Though Peter criticizes the effeminate ways of certain men at Capernaum, Jesus argues that "they were tender in spirit, and would congregate beneath a tree, because they were not welcome in the temple. I was gentle with them." Indeed, his relationship with Judas is represented as being full of suppressed sexual tension. "With his dark beard, he was handsome. I wished him to be among my twelve even if I could not see what was in my heart. His eyes were too full of fire. Indeed, I felt blinded by the blaze of his spirit." And when Judas gives the kiss of betrayal, Jesus relates, "he kissed me on the mouth. It was then that I knew he loved me too, and more than he could ever have believed."

Even feminist concerns are aired, though—perhaps predictably, seeing that this comes from Mailer—they are aired by the Devil. "Your Father," he tells Jesus, "does not comprehend that women are creatures different

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from men and live with separate understanding. Indeed, your Father has no inkling of women; His scorn for them is shared by His prophets, who speak, so they claim, with His voice." Jesus, on the other hand, seems to think that women should not trouble their pretty heads over the effort of bringing about the Kingdom of God. "I had not sought to save the world through the efforts of women," he says. "Only through the strivings of men."

In the May issue of *Playboy*, a journalist interviewing Saul Bellow quoted Mailer as having said, almost forty years ago, that his ambition was "to write a novel which Dostoyevsky and Marx, Joyce and Freud, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler, Faulkner, and even old moldering Hemingway might come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way," to which Bellow smartly retorted, "He deserved to fail with a fantasy like that. He wasn't thinking about writing a marvelous book, he was thinking of placing himself in a tradition." *The Gospel According to the Son* shows that Mailer still is more concerned with his place in a tradition than with the actual quality of his work; for all its highflown ideas it is a flimsy, careless, shoddy piece of writing, and a cynical effort to create excitement by addressing a subject about which many people feel passionately. That he himself does not feel passionately is evident from the clear lack of effort he has put into his work.

An expert noticer

Saul Bellow The Actual.
Viking, 124 pages, $17.95

reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

Saul Bellow's most recent publication, *The Actual*, brings his literary production—in a publishing career now spanning more than half a century—to some eighteen volumes of prose fiction, criticism, travel writing, and reminiscence. In his longevity, at least, he has rivaled William Dean Howells, and it may turn out that Bellow will have done best, for our time, what Howells did well for nineteenth-century America—that is, to have provided a reasonably realistic and representative portrait of the moral and social tendencies of his time. Hippolyte Taine called Howells "a precious painter and a sovereign witness," and a like tribute may be voiced in respect to Bellow. In any case, both men in old age earned the "distinction" of being called "the Dean of American Letters." In Bellow's case, its literal relevance may lie in his having poured himself, so fully, into *The Dean's December* (1982).

Bellow most likely will be remembered for his comic, freewheeling novels: *Adventures of Augie March* (1953)—which won the National Book Award; *Henderson the Rain King* (1959); *Herzog* (1964)—another NBA winner; *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970)—ditto; and *Humboldt's Gift*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. Still, in certain moods, I confess to a partiality for Bellow in a minor key. He launched his literary career, more than fifty years ago, with that genre sanctified by Henry James as the "blest *nouvelle*." *Dangling Man* (1944) dealt with the Kafkaesque situation of a young man awaiting induction into the army in World War II. It established Bellow, in the generation of the Forties, as a master of the foreshortened glimpse and so prepared the way for the splendid brevities of *Seize the Day* (1956), *A Theft* (1989), *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989), and now *The Actual*.

Thanks to the big books of the Fifties, Bellow's readership vastly expanded. His reputation, like that of Bernard Malamud, peaked in the late 1960s, with the huge postwar American hunger to understand contemporary Jewish life and experience. Although his characters almost always moved in and out of a Chicago underworld culture of petty thievery, small-time graft, and civic corruption, they were usually winsome seekers for the good life, street-smart, wisecracking comedians spouting, in mixed-up and mangled fashion, Plato, Virgil, Dostoyevsky, or Sholem Aleichem. Out of an

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odd mix of great philosophers, historians, and artists, Bellow created an appealing affirmation of modern life. His was a secular humanism based on the accumulated wisdom of Jewish experience, providing an alternative to the commonly felt postwar pessimism and despair.

In due course, Bellow fell out of favor with certain New York critics, who resented his failure throughout the Sixties to parrot the familiar leftist pieties still *de rigueur* in those years if one wanted to be taken as a serious novelist. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *The Dean's December* were especially grating to the Left because they showed the collapse of the "Great Society"—the Liberal Dream of presidents Kennedy and Johnson—into a crime-ridden, drug-infested, race-torn society run by venal manipulators and the charlatans of identity politics. *The Dean's December* was doubly vexing in that it showed Eastern Europe, the workers' paradise, to be the rotten shell of a once-vibrant culture. Bellow's clarifying vision of Sixties America expressed in fictional form something like the Neoconservative critique of bankrupt liberalism then arising in the West. The gathering power of those fictional achievements, together with the depth of his social observation, won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976.

During the 1980s, Bellow seemed largely to bask in the glow of his laureate status. *Him with His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories* (1984), like his earlier *Mosby's Memoirs* (1968), was a provocative short miscellany, but it was mostly notable for an emergent elegiac tone that suggested an older writer beginning to throw his backward glance o'er travel'd roads. Elegiac memory deepened into the theme itself in *The Bellarosa Connection*, where the narrator—the founder of the Mnemosyne Institute of Philadelphia—undertakes to memorialize the rescue of some Italian Jews from the Nazis, thanks to the intervention and misunderstood "connections" of Billy Rose, the show-biz impresario.

By the 1990s, as Bellow approached and then passed the octogenarian landmark, this tone of elegiac retrospection became even more acute. *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to an Uncertain Future* (1994), a nonfiction collection, returned Bellow to the Montreal of his birth and to the Chicago of his youth. Reminiscing about his search for aesthetic bliss, Bellow rose to a spirited defense of art, contesting, among other things, the viewpoint of those Marxist intellectuals and left-wing reviewers who, years before, had faulted him for not being radical and who hung on to Stalinism, indeed even after the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact had shown the moral bankruptcy of the Communist Left.

But *The Actual* is even mellower in its tender retrospections than its recent predecessors. Despite its brevity, it is about a great many things that are not as simple as they at first seem. One of these is the narrator, Harry Trellman, a retired Jewish-American businessman who has lived a life of emotional self-concealment. A man who never wished to be known, Harry has lived in exile from others, in fact even from himself. The fact of his spiritual camouflage Bellow symbolizes in Trellman's impassive, even Oriental-looking face and his pronounced "Chinese lip." Trellman, in any case, is drawn into the orbit of a retired billionaire businessman, Sigmund Adletsky, who has spotted Harry's most impressive personal gift—the capacity for identifying the hidden motive beneath people's idiosyncratic social behavior. Adletsky recruits Harry for a kind of informal "brain trust." He wants, as occasional advisers, men such as Harry who are first-class "noticers."

Not much happens in the course of *The Actual*. Trellman ruminates at length on the people who move in his social circle. He spends a lot of time thinking of his first love, Amy Wustrin. She is a decorator whose philandering husband, Jay, after years of neglect, bugged her bed, caught her *in flagrante delicto* with some lover, and then sued her for adultery. After his death, Jay was wrongly buried in her father's cemetery plot and must now be exhumed and re-

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buried elsewhere. Trellman has known both Jay and Amy since childhood and envied Jay his marriage to Amy, although he never told her of his love. Even so, Harry has been having imaginary conversations with Amy since they were fifteen. She is the central fact of his emotional life, although she evidently does not know it.

The rich Adletsky and his wife, "Dame Siggy," decide to purchase a lakefront apartment, and are obliged to dicker with the Bodo Heisingers, who want to sell the fake antique furniture with it. Adletsky hires Amy to advise them. He also picks Harry's brain about the Heisingers. This couple is mainly notable because Madge Heisinger had tried to ice her husband. The plot failed when her hit man, Tommy Bales, dropped the gun. She and the hit man went to jail for four years, but Bodo, after divorcing her, forgave her and remarried her when she got out of the slammer. Heisinger is a recurrent Bellovian type: "one of those men who dote on impossible women." Even so, Harry ruminates:

> These were all commonplace persons. I would never have let them think so, but it's time to admit that I looked down on them. They were lacking in higher motives. They were run-of-the-mill products of our mass democracy with no distinctive contribution to make to the history of the species, satisfied to pile up money or seduce women, to copulate, thrive in the sack as the degenerate children of Eros, male but not manly, and living, the men and women alike, on threadbare ideas, without beauty, without virtue, without the slightest independence of spirit—privileged in the way of money and goods, the beneficiaries of man's conquest of nature as the Enlightenment foresaw it and of the high-tech achievements that have transformed the material world.

Commonplace they are, but Harry notices, them, watches them, studies them. He is looking for "signs of a higher capacity." Although he finds precious little to encourage him, he expresses the burden of Bellow's advancing age as he prepares himself "to make my peace with my species." Perhaps he is more like Bodo than he realizes—"thinking of the time remaining, a decade or so: 'the final years,' as biographers refer to them—a period of 'mature' acceptance, reconciliation, openhandedness, general amnesty." But Harry's fear of death is also displaced onto troubling images of his friend Jay Wustrin being exhumed: the decomposing body laid out in a suit, the tie, the knotted shoelaces.

There is, of course, one person that Trellman cares for—Jay's ex-wife Amy. The billionaire Adletsky, a good noticer himself, intuits this and sends Harry off to attend her during the exhumation process. In the end, Harry's evasiveness dissolves. In fact, sitting in the limousine, he makes a better-late-than-never marriage proposal—even as the noisy backhoe is digging the new grave for Jay. What makes Amy so important is that she is "actual." She is "the actual." Other women exist—but only to remind Harry of her. There is only one Amy.

This view of Amy produces some rather interesting philosophical seeds that Bellow is content to drop without cultivating. Evidently he intends to suggest that whatever may be the appeal of the merely subjective Amy (with whom Harry has talked things over for forty years); whatever may be the attraction of the imaginative Amy (with whom he continually conversed during their long respective marriages); or whatever may be the appeal of the platonic idea of Amy, Bellow's protagonist finally embraces the actual woman.

Is there a connection here with his art? In my reading, Bellow himself has always embraced the actual, always married his art to the actualities of the here and now. For this expert noticer of the hidden motive, the actual has always yielded just enough evidence of a higher capacity in people, just enough evidence of even a spiritual grandeur in humanity, to accommodate a "mature acceptance" of the species. The result is a fictional celebration of the world as created, despite its human imperfections, an act of life even at the edge of the grave.

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From ancient grudge

Robert B. Strassler, editor
The Landmark Thucydides:
A Comprehensive Guide to the
Peloponnesian War.
Translated by Richard Crawley.
The Free Press, 711 pages, $45

reviewed by Arthur Waldron

Thucydides' story of the conflict between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century B.C., I tell my students at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, will introduce them to virtually every type of person and situation that they will encounter in their modern military careers. But to get that much, it is almost essential to read his *Peloponnesian War* with a group that contains some experts able to initiate the newcomers. That is what I have found at the college, where the book was made a foundation stone of the curriculum in the early Seventies by the school's reforming president, Admiral Stansfield Turner. Turner had been a Rhodes Scholar and was undoubtedly impressed by the Oxbridge stress on the classics. But in the 1970s there was another strong reason for U.S. military officers to look at ancient Athens. Our involvement in the Vietnam War was too explosive a matter to be argued directly at the War College. But the wisdom of the Sicilian Expedition for Athens, a brilliant or crazy scheme, depending on how you assessed stakes and interests, provided an analogy two millennia old, which worked very well.

As the Vietnam War has receded, the stress on the Sicilian Expedition has diminished. When the students meet in small groups for their three-hour seminars on the book, attention today is often on how a maritime power engages a land power and vice versa, or Thucydides' view of democracy, or the strengths and weaknesses of the Periclean strategy.

One complaint, however, has united students and faculty for as long as this ancient war has been taught at Newport, a complaint about the teaching materials. We have used the Penguin Classics edition of Thucydides, translated by Rex Warner, which is a fluent and smooth English version and (I assume) accurate as well. But no one, whether student or general reader, can really understand it without recourse to all sorts of supplementary materials: maps above all, but also chronology, annotation, and explanation.

Now the appearance of Robert B. Strassler's *Landmark Thucydides* has transformed this unsatisfactory situation. The book is just about everything that could be asked for. At the top of each page running heads give date, place, book number, and summary in a phrase. Small- and medium-sized maps, specific to the moment in the narration, appear on many pages, inserted into the text precisely at the points needed, with the places or features in question highlighted. Summaries of the action with dates accompany each numbered passage at the margins. Footnotes provide brief explanations, as well as cross references both to text and to maps. At the front, a businesslike introduction by Victor Davis Hanson, a professor of Greek at California State University, Fresno, sets the stage and formulates issues with great clarity. At the end of the text, a twenty-page chronology traces the course of the war in the four primary theaters and other regions, with exact textual references for every event listed. This indispensable tool is followed by eleven appendices, on important topics of government, empire, institutions, methods of warfare, religion, money, and so forth—each written by a leading authority. Finally come a glossary, bibliographies of ancient and then modern sources, and reference maps. The index is a model of the genre: comprehensive and listing ideas as well as names and places. The book is big and comfortable to hold: even the smallest type in the notes is readable.

Indeed, only one real criticism can be leveled against the book, and that concerns the translation, by Richard Crawley, first

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published in 1874. In an edition clearly aimed at general readers, narration such as the following can only be an obstacle:

> Phormio, meanwhile, being himself not without fears for the courage of his men, and noticing that they were forming in groups among themselves and were alarmed at the odds against them, desired to call them together and give them confidence and counsel in the present emergency.

In his editor's note Strassler praises the accuracy and the quality of Crawley's language, while admitting that he has seen fit to break up some sentences and modernize the Victorian diction here and there. Certainly Crawley's version is fine English prose of a certain type, but as a teacher I wish that it had been possible to use Warner's, which is simply easier for today's students to read. Perhaps copyright made that impossible.

Even with Strassler's magnificent volume, however, most readers of Thucydides will need additional background really to grasp the power of the text and the reason it has survived. The problem will be apparent if one asks what people today know or remember about World War II—which classically educated Europeans regularly saw as the final stage of their own Peloponnesian War. The sense from hindsight, I suspect, would be that Allied victory was inevitable, indeed overdetermined. How could Germany and Italy and Japan ever expect to prevail over Britain plus the United States plus the Soviet Union? Certainly little sense of danger survives anymore when we consider that conflict. If anything, the concern is that too much force was used in securing the victory—e.g. through area bombing and the atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The conflict has been transformed from a test of will and strength whose outcome was unknown into little more than a clearing mechanism for greater social forces. Indeed, this approach is so thoroughly accepted by most intellectuals that wars are scarcely studied anymore in our universities.

Few mainstream American academics these days give war a second thought (Britain is different). They rarely ask the sort of question that I heard about through the academic grapevine during the Gulf War, when events forced it. One eminent historian buttonholed another, one of our rare experts on war: "What is war anyway?" the first asked, with real puzzlement. "Doesn't it boil down to sociology plus technology?"

The questioner was one of the many thinkers since ancient times who have felt intuitively that war ought to be reducible to a subset of something else; who have sought an algorithm that will convert its horror and passion and chaos into something a little more law-abiding and intellectually respectable.

The second historian's reply is not recorded, but he would have done well to suggest a reading of Thucydides, as well as of Clausewitz, who provides the best answer I know. War, said Clausewitz, is a paradoxical interplay of passion, reason, and chance—three utterly incommensurable and incompatible elements. Their compound is therefore volatile and difficult to predict and liable to explode in one's hands.

Two ingredients here, passion and chance, are particularly difficult to capture in retrospect, whether in historical writing or in fiction, although they are two-thirds of war, and they are what are missing from the conventional wisdom about the Second World War (as well, as will be seen, from the Peloponnesian War as generally understood today).

World War II was no inevitable Allied victory. Quite the opposite. Hitler had *won* the Second World War by the spring of 1940: won in the sense that it was well-nigh impossible to conceive of a plausible scenario by which he would be defeated. Churchill might bluster heroically from his island, but on the ground Nazi Germany had conquered almost the entire European continent. The United States was out of the picture; the USSR was Hitler's ally. Had Hitler not made the fatal mistake of turning against Stalin, he most likely would have

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eventually secured a government in Britain willing to settle.

European unity would have arrived early, in a more sinister form than currently contemplated; the Final Solution would have proceeded unknown and unimpeded; nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles would have been perfected first in the Third Reich. The world we know and take for granted today would not only never have been, it would seem inconceivable.

But how often today does anyone ponder the full significance of 1940 when he thinks about World War II? As narrative, the year is not very interesting, except for the dramatic collapse of France, over which historians still puzzle. Certainly 1940 pales compared to what followed—Pearl Harbor, Midway, Kursk, Normandy, etc.

Yet it is the uncertainty of 1940, the choice between two world futures, choices decided not by greater social forces, but ultimately by the folly of one man, that makes World War II important. As Clausewitz understood, war is more like art than engineering (or economics, then not yet invented, which has become a common intellectual framework for dealing with war today).

Thucydides certainly understood the role of chance or contingency in war, although not all his readers grasp this. He had himself contributed to the ultimate disaster of Athens by being too late in 424 B.C. with the seven triremes he commanded to save Amphipolis, a crucial city. His account of why Athens lost is, moreover, highly personal. Pericles had the right strategy from the start, and had the great man lived, it would probably have worked as planned. But he died, and successors such as Cleon and Alcibiades seduced the mob to support ill-judged and catastrophic adventures. In the abstract, Thucydides seems to blame democracy, which substitutes the passions of the crowd for the reasoned judgment of the elite.

What most readers and students take away from Thucydides, however, is something that smacks much more of social science: namely, his invention or discovery of the deeper causes of war. To say that the Trojan War was caused by the abduction of Helen may once have been satisfactory, but the modern sensibility is much happier with Thucydides' formula for the Peloponnesian conflict, that it was determined by the growth of Athenian power and the fear it inspired in the Spartans. In his Introduction, Hanson notes that Thucydides understood the ultimate confrontation "would be both inevitable and terrible."

That sort of objective-seeming analysis gives to war a dignity that appeals not only to the social-science mind but also to the moral needs of the present. Who wants to take *blame*? Whether speaking of the suicide of Europe in this century, or the catastrophe of Athens, it is easier to accept that it was determined or overdetermined, and certainly not caused by sins of omission and commission by villains like Hitler as well as by good men such as Pericles or Chamberlain.

Understanding of the tragic truth that we are in fact responsible for wars haunts many of those who have actually participated in making or fighting them, but tends to elude many intelligent academic students of the topic. The best way to bring this to life is to point out that no leader refuses negotiations or enters into a war asking "What will happen?" Rather he asks "what shall we do?"

To bring this out in teaching means asking not "what happened?" so much as "what would you have done?" and in particular, "how could the war have been avoided" and "how, plausibly, could the losers have won?" Some scientific historians frown on that sort of counterfactual approach, but it alone lays bare the causal sinews, the possibilities, and the fatal choices.

Athens certainly had choices. Sparta sued repeatedly for peace; indeed, peace parties existed in both cities, which were in touch with each other. True, the Spartans, when they marched on Athens, misjudged their own power, but Pericles also totally mis-

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judged the nature of the war, overestimating the efficacy of his own defensive strategy, and failing to anticipate what the Spartans might do and how that would lead to escalation. (Donald Kagan's four-volume history of the war, which belongs on the shelf next to Strassler, brings these and other points out with great clarity).

Constructing hypothetical operations and negotiations that could have terminated the Peloponnesian conflict short of disaster is not difficult. The mystery both in this and other examples, such as World War I, is why such paths were not taken, but instead entire civilizations were sacrificed. To understand war properly means understanding that it is not a natural phenomenon like an avalanche or a typhoon, even if it often seems that way. Nor is war completely determined by social forces, although they certainly can make it more possible, and even likely. Because they are human products, and not acts of nature or of God, wars pose the question "why?" in a way that human beings ought to be able to answer. To feel the force of the question, however, requires real understanding of the alternatives, and the choices, whether ancient or modern.

North by northeast

Brad Leithauser
The Friends of Freeland.
Knopf, 508 pages, $26

reviewed by Peter Schwendener

Freeland, the imaginary locale of Brad Leithauser's new novel, is a group of islands situated in the North Atlantic. Its capital, Thorskrist, is "the northernmost capital in the world, and may well be the smallest"—the country's morose population is around sixty thousand. The people of Freeland survive on fish, and are heavy drinkers yet also prudish, maintaining a set of punitive drinking laws the narrator calls "surreal."

The novel opens in the wake of a disaster, the discovery of a dead teenager "who was last glimpsed alive at an impromptu party in a parking lot behind one of our discotheques." There is a growing malaise in the country, and its president, Hannibal Hannibalsson, addresses the scandal of the boy's death in a rambling oration that seeks to revive a sense of Freeland's proud past. Standing on a park bench in downtown Thorskrist, near a statue of Erik the Other (who founded the country in A.D. 980), he shakes off a hangover enough to ask the equally hungover crowd, "Who with mere words can add to this tragedy anything of more value than a pickled herring?" Narrating all of this is his oldest friend and adviser, Eggert Oddason, who compares Freeland's tawdry present to a "solider past" when "we *had* no discotheques." Freeland is becoming dangerously like America and the rest of the world "Down Below."

The president, who while delivering the speech is observed by the narrator to have a "brown substance" on one side of his head that turns out to be dried vomit, has been in office for twenty years, and has promised to step down before the next election. It is generally believed, by his countrymen as well as by his gap-toothed mistress, Rut Bjartardottir, that Freeland needs a more with-it chief executive. Inconveniently, Hannibal has a "vision" that convinces him he must run for one more term, and the vision is seconded by the crone Thorgunnur Sigurdardottir, his old schoolteacher who now lives in an Eldershelter, or nursing home. His holy mission, she tells him, is to ensure the return to Freeland of the only copy of its national epic, *The Freeland Saga*, "stolen" several centuries ago by Icelanders ("never mind," grumbles the skeptical narrator, "that it was almost surely written by an Icelander, almost surely in Iceland, about an Icelandic expedition").

This vision sets the novel in motion, dispersing its action to warmer parts of the globe, principally Detroit and Cambridge, Massachusetts. The American parts of the book, which are set a couple of decades before the Freeland election, constitute the

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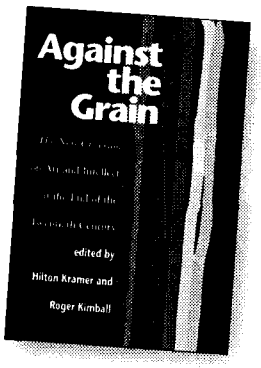
"No one who reads this volume can be in any doubt what the cultural war in the U.S. is all about, or who ought to win it."
—Paul Johnson, *The Wall Street Journal*

Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball



An abundant selection of incisive writings from the magazine that has emerged as the foremost voice of critical dissent in the culture wars now raging throughout American society. *The New Criterion,* writes Paul Johnson, "upholds the highest civilized standards in our culture and combats the new barbarism." Written with wit, clarity, and fierce independence, *Against the Grain* is a major contribution to sanity and common sense on the most contentious cultural issues of the day.

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Bildungsroman of its narrator, Eggert Oddason. As Freeland's Poet Laureate, Oddason believes that it is his duty to amass, by travel or other means, as much experience of the world Down Below as he can, the better to bring "modern letters to my backwater nation." He swells his word-hoard with American slang, intoxicated by "the country where a man might at last say attaboy, bamboozle, chippie, dibs, eagerbeaver, feedbag, gams," and has translated Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, *The Ancient Mariner*, and other foreign works into Freelandic. A twitching mass of literary and erotic ambition, he has written forty-nine books (he writes another one before the novel is over) and will sleep with any woman who can surmount an aversion to his appearance, which he repeatedly describes in terms such as "Hamster-faced." He contrasts sharply with Hannibal, who may have vomit on his head but also has archaic dignity and "a consummate athlete's grace," the latter surviving from an earlier career as Freeland's greatest Olympic contender. Hannibal "lacks the vocabulary of self-doubt"; he and the itchy narrator are, respectively, the naïve and sentimental poets of their country.

This is, if not exactly a novel of ideas, a novel about idealism. Freeland, though lavishly and expertly described, has from the beginning of the book a certain hazy quality that resists too much concrete information. If it resembles any place in particular it is not its near neighbors Iceland or Greenland but the Zembla of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, or maybe one of Swift's imaginary countries without the Swiftian bile or paranoia. To Eggert Oddason, who almost intrusively keeps telling the reader how much he loves the place, its treelessness, sunlessness, and general emptiness are powerful spurs to literary imagination:

> It wasn't to enact the poignant tragedy of a flower clipped before its bloom that I was placed upon this earth. No, I was deposited here to embody fullness and fruition. . . . Rat that I am, I'm also an arctic fox—wasn't I also

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> intended to create, from worthless scraps of fustian, the modern Freelandic novel, the modern Freelandic play, the modern Freelandic poem?

The place has a paradoxically rich featurelessness that sends its residents, as well as Leithauser's readers, scurrying back to their own imaginations to fill in its gaps.

The aging Hannibal confronts, as his political opponent, a genial younger man named Nonni Karlson, who hires a gruesome trio of media specialists from the States to run his campaign; they teach him "to grin while being asked a question and to say *I have a three-part answer to that* even if he subsequently demonstrates he cannot count up to three." The attempt at political satire, which seems to require a mildly depressed sensibility, is perhaps too much at odds with this novel's expansiveness, its delight in its own inventiveness. The most effective satire centers on Freeland's avid yet strangely deglamorized consumerism. The tables at a popular Freelandic flea market are burdened with international cast-offs, among them a cactus, a tin of English tea, "seven cans of a Scottish antiperspirant called Mist o' the Morning," and "a shrink-wrapped copy of Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*."

There are one or two metafictional flourishes, as when Eggert bewails "the straitened, distorting business of narrative selection"; on the whole, however, the complexity here is human and interesting rather than literary and annoying. The reader's sense of Freeland's miragelike quality grows as the book nears its end, and the story concludes in a kind of blaze of mysticism. Hannibal narrowly loses the election to Nonni Karlson, but is reconciled with his mistress, Rut, who had been enraged by his decision to run again, and copulates with her on a bed of moss as the entire archipelago is engulfed by "a colossal bubble of balmy Caribbean air" that drifts up the Gulf Stream. Later, squeezing her arm as they look out over the sea he somewhat eerily (or is it affirmatively?) says, "Those countries Down Below are a passing affair. . . . Don't you see? In the end, only Freeland is real." Whatever its metaphysical status may be, Freeland is, like the rest of the book, a dauntingly solid fictional achievement.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

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Letters

Blumenthal's closet

To the Editors:
Hilton Kramer's conspiracy theory about my essay "The Cold War and the Closet" and its publication in *The New Yorker* is sheer nonsense (Notes & Comments, April 1997).

In his polemical name-calling, Mr. Kramer obscured and distorted my views on Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers. Very briefly, I believe that Hiss was very likely guilty and that Chambers was very likely in love with him. Deal with it.

Sidney Blumenthal

The Editors reply:
O.K., this explains Mr. Blumenthal's take on the Closet. But whatever happened to the Cold War? "The Cold War and the Closet" was his title not ours.

The eclipse of listening

To the Editors:
Roger Scruton's article "The Eclipse of Listening" (November 1996) on the unfortunate state of modern concert music was on target in many respects. As a composer, I found myself more often agreeing than disagreeing. Some of Scruton's points, however, could use amplification or adjustment. Further, let me sketch out a few items he neglected.

Scruton's twin devils are atonal modernism and the historical performance movement; that they were jointly responsible for the great diminishing of the concert audience and their interest in new music. According to Scruton, both of these twentieth-century trends were somewhat justifiable reactions against the sentimental excesses of Romanticism, but in fact belittled the audience as, in some sense, ignorant and outside the loop of musical expertise. As for the historical performance movement, Scruton feels that its ideals are impossible to achieve, since one can never recreate the historical setting in its entirety, including the mindset of an audience unfamiliar with our more contemporary performances or instruments. Much of his argument is persuasive.

Yet, should not Scruton's criteria of the impossibility of historical performance be applied to his criticism of non-tonalism in all its formats (serialism, minimalism, etc.)? Scruton seems to prescribe a wholesale return to tonality as historically conceived; yet any current composer's use of tonality must be processed through the modernism of twentieth-century experience. This is why, as Scruton puts it, the neo-tonality of certain composers, such as David Del Tredici, remains in "inverted commas." We cannot return to a pristine tonal tradition just as we cannot recreate historically accurate performance. On the other hand, it may be possible to "recover" tonality by working within a tradition, say jazz or popular tonality or the work of early twentieth-century composers such as Stravinsky, Bartók, or Berg, in which the grammar was never wholly overturned in the first place.

The advantage of adapting popular or jazz

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tonality to concert use is that it accords with the grammatical coincidence of popular and fine art in pre-twentieth-century music. That is, the same tonal grammar (often called "common practice tonality"), within broad outlines, organized a Stephen Foster song as well as a Brahms symphony. The differences in their grammars were of scale and complexity, not type. This grammatical coincidence let the interested nineteenth-century listener scale cultural heights from popular and folk music to midcult genres such as operetta, then to concert masterworks. If composers with a fine-art sensibility are to capture more of today's music audience, it would seem that adopting the grammar of popular music or jazz and reapplying it to works of greater emotional and structural depth is worth a try. The continuity of grammar through a gamut of popular to fine-art culture could mean the return of a vital midcult repertoire, whose lacuna Scruton justly laments.

In addition to continuity of grammar from popular to fine-art culture, there is the issue of instrumentation. Prior to the twentieth century, the same instruments were used for all forms of music making. Nowadays popular music is mostly electronic, and concert composers are thus pressured to adopt the same media. Hence, radical instrumentation has become a desideratum in new music, which clashes with the notion of standardized ensembles in the Western tradition. Concerts including electronics and unusual instrumentation simply do not blend on orchestral programs: the orchestra at a standard concert is out of place with electronics or computer-interactive media.

Composers today are pressured to innovate in all areas; in particular they are expected to create and solve difficult problems of form. Prior to modernism, composers adhered mostly to established forms that changed fairly slowly during a person's lifetime: consider the evolution of the fugue; or the three- or four-movement sonata-type work for standard instrumentations ranging from piano solo to string quartet to orchestra. Popular music, geared to market demand, keeps the song form as its basis—even today, though this form has evolved in fairly radical ways. Hence, the popular-music listener knows roughly what to expect when hearing a new piece; the concertgoer is bewildered.

There are other factors that Scruton fails to emphasize in the decline of the concert-music audience. Perhaps the foremost is the loss of music education in the schools. Simply put, our children must experience excellence in music at an early age in order to develop lifelong appreciation.

What do most composers today want? I suspect their principal wish would be demand for their music. Because the best works of the classical repertoire have now been over-recorded and over-performed, the only hope for the concert scene is the production of music that connects to audiences, yet does not compromise artistic validity.

Although the times were simpler before the twentieth century, when change occurred more slowly, balance between tradition and innovation has characterized great Western art in the past. It may be its only hope for the future.

Henry Martin
The Mannes College of Music
New York, N.Y.

Ginsberg & company

To the Editors:
I would like to thank you for your comments on Allen Ginsberg (Notes & Comments, May 1997).

During the 1950s, I was one of several painters in San Francisco who had solo exhibitions at the Six Gallery where "Howl" was presented. Although I did not attend the reading, I remember the reaction to it. What angers me is the total revision of that period of so-called "Beat" activity. Now, as in the many tributes to Ginsberg, any of us who were in any way included in this activity are labeled as acolytes or aesthetic associates of Ginsberg and company. I am not the only one who found much of the so-called poetry of that time banal and, as you stated, "without art." I still do.

Sonia Gechtoff
New York

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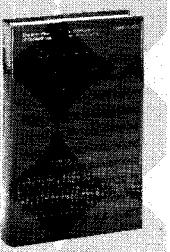

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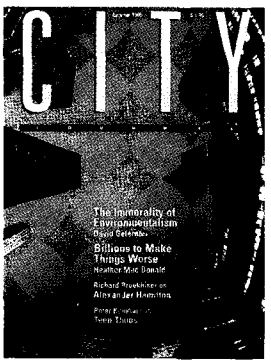

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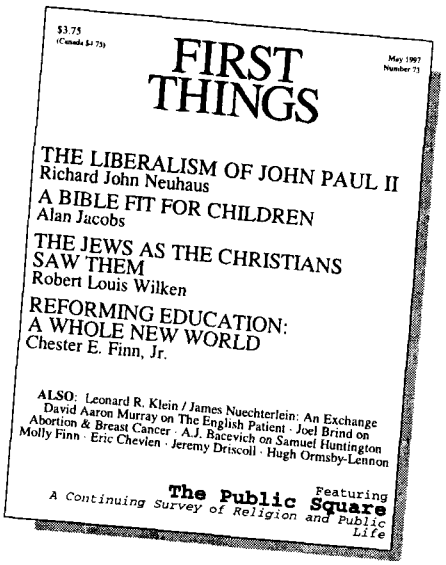
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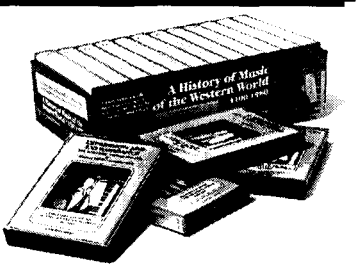

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